

How to Help Teenagers Get More Sleep

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It's not easy, but parents still have the power to encourage good sleep habits

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From the time they hit puberty until the age of 22, adolescents [need about 9 hours of sleep](#) a night to function optimally—to be physically, mentally and cognitively healthy. Tell this to nine out of ten teenagers (or their parents for that matter) and they will laugh. What teenager has time to sleep for 9 hours a night during the school year?

Very few. In fact only about 8 percent of American teenagers get the sleep they need, according to a recent study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. The rest live with *chronic*

[sleep deprivation](#)—some mild to moderate, but more than half (59%) with severe sleep deprivation, meaning they sleep on average six hours or less most school nights.

In fact the nation's pediatricians have declared insufficient sleep for adolescents “an important public health issue.” [In a report, the American Academy of Pediatrics noted](#) that lack of sleep not only undermines our teenagers' safety and their academic performance, but puts them at higher risk for [depression](#) and obesity. The AAP report supports later start times for high schools and middle schools.

Sweeping policy changes may eventually help our kids stay awake in geometry—and behind the wheel on the way to school—but in the short term we need to do as much as we can to get our kids to build more sleep into their lives.

There are lifestyle changes that middle- and high-schoolers can make, and even several small changes can have a big effect on their well-being. We asked some experts for their advice on how to combat [sleep deprivation](#) and win back a couple of precious hours a night. Here's what they said:

It takes commitment

It's one thing to enforce bedtime for a younger child—though that can be a tough and prolonged battle, too. But when it comes to adolescents, it's trickier. Teens aren't likely to change their [sleep habits](#) unless they recognize that more sleep will make them feel better and improve their performance in school. And both teens and parents have to be willing to put in the effort. It's hard, but parents need to show that it's important, and [talk it out](#).

Parents *are* important, no matter what kids say

“There's pretty good evidence that parental help with [limit-setting around bedtimes](#) and [study times](#) and [media](#) is helpful,” says Mary Carskadon, PhD, a professor of psychiatry at Brown University and director of chronobiology and sleep research at Bradley Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. “It's hard to jump in with teens if you haven't started when the child is younger,” she adds, but despite adolescents' expectations of autonomy, parental influence and expectations really do help kids make better decisions about managing their time.

Be consistent with teenage sleeping habits

“Consistency is really, really crucial in terms of building [healthy sleep habits](#),” says Alison Baker, MD, a child and adolescent *psychiatrist*.

That means it’s important for your teen to go to bed as close as possible to the same time every night, and get as close to 8 hours of sleep as possible. But it’s also important for him to stick to the same schedule—within reason—on the weekends.

If a kid’s sleep schedule shifts dramatically on the weekends—staying up most of the night and sleeping until midafternoon Saturday and Sunday—the chances of getting back to normal Sunday night are slim. It’s not easy for kids to resist—no one wants to be the first to leave the party—but the academic, athletic, and social demands of the week have no time for the weekend.

Screens off an hour before bed

Most clinicians, and everyone we talked to, emphasize the importance of turning off all electronic devices a minimum of an hour before the time young people are trying to go to sleep. And it’s more than just excitement. Electronic screens emit a glow called “blue light” at a particular frequency that sends “a signal to the brain which suppresses the production of melatonin and keeps kids from feeling tired,” says Max Van Gilder, MD, a pediatrician in practice for 40 years. He suggests planning ahead so that homework that needs to be done on a screen is completed by early evening and “off-screen” work is saved for later at night. That also means no “unwinding” by going on [Facebook or YouTube](#).

What’s more, [social media](#) is a great place to find new sources of [anxiety](#). Good luck getting to sleep if you’ve just read something socially stressful from your best frenemy.

Dr. Van Gilder also recommends [f.lux, a free app](#) that automatically adjusts the light on your computer screen to coincide with the time of day. F.lux automatically removes the stimulating blue light from your computer screen at night so that you’re able to sleep better even if you’ve been up late working on a paper.

And the family can help, too, by altering the home environment. It can be useful to start gradually dimming lights around the house to signal when it’s time to quiet down and start moving towards sleep.

Watch the snacking

Adolescents, many of whom control over their diet for the first time, are prone to eating and drinking on an ersatz schedule, as a means to self-regulate, or to stay awake, or just because they *can*. But the bag of chips, or the cookies at 1am, or caffeine any time after dinner—whether or not they help get the essay written—can postpone sleep, and harmfully.

Boost the biological clock

One of the most significant physiological changes to occur in *adolescence*

is a shift in the production of melatonin, the sleep hormone. Effectively, teens are living in a different time zone than the rest of us. But “that is the normal circadian rhythm for 15-22 year-olds,” says Dr. Van Gilder. He frequently recommends that teens who have trouble sleeping try taking a low dose (2-3 mg) of melatonin (a non-prescription vitamin which can be purchased at the drugstore) one to two hours before it’s time to go to bed to help jumpstart melatonin production.

Simplify

“Overscheduling” and the pressure to build a college resume have pushed many teens beyond what they can reasonably accomplish in the space of a day or a week. “We need to get colleges to revise the message they’re sending,” Dr. Carskadon says. “But the family really is the core. You have to help your child understand that they can’t do a hundred percent of everything.” Kids need you to [help them set realistic expectations for their time](#), and your support and acceptance when approaching the college process.

Set a good example

“Parents need to model good sleep habits for their teens,” Dr. Baker says. “Staying up all night with your kid to edit his paper or pulling an all-nighter for work yourself isn’t really sending the right message.” Parents who make sleep a priority for themselves show their kids that it’s part of living a healthy lifestyle—like eating right and exercising regularly.

Streamline mornings

While there’s not much you can do about your school’s start time, Dr. Van Gilder says teens should [organize their mornings](#) so that they can sleep in “as long as is humanly possible.” Consider showering, picking out clothes and packing up books before bed so you don’t have to spend time doing it in the morning. “Ask mom or dad to make you an egg sandwich to eat on the bus. Whatever it takes to squeeze in as much sleep as possible and arrive one minute before school starts.”

Pump up productivity

For the first two years of high school Gabriel Levine, now 19, bought into the pervasive attitude at Hunter College High School that he describes as “basically, it’s cool to do really well on as little sleep as possible.” Then at the beginning of junior year he got very interested in the topic of productivity and started reading a lot of studies. “I discovered that a lot of my academic performance could be better by sleeping a full 8 hours than by staying up all night studying. Cognitive functioning is just better with sleep and without it, you sacrifice that.”

Since then Levine, who just finished his first year at the University of Chicago, has been committed to getting a minimum of 7-8 hours of sleep every night. He managed this in high school, he says, by using the odd bits of time during the day he’d been inclined to blow off as too short to be fruitful. “I’d even work during rehearsals when I wasn’t needed on stage,” he says.

Levine also found that he worked most productively in 45-minute blocks separated by 10-minute breaks to clear his head. “If you break it down into bite-size pieces and use the time you have during the day, you can get a lot done and be a lot more relaxed about the whole thing.”

The bed is for sleep

Experts agree that it’s easier to fall asleep and stay asleep if you associate the bed with sleeping. That means working in another room you associate with getting work done might get you to the finish line faster, as well as allowing you to shift gears when it’s time for sleep. “Once a place has been unproductive for me, it’s tainted,” says Levine, who doesn’t study in any room that has a bed. “If I’ve gotten really good work done somewhere then I keep going back and the association reinforces the reality.”

Cutting down on distractions also gets one closer to potential sleep time. Kids shouldn't be logged onto Gchat while they do their chemistry homework. Amazingly, the phone might be a better way to collaborate on homework projects—more direct, less time to dither and chat, more time to get things done.

Final advice on teens and sleep

Check in with your teen and ask (not nag, but ask), “what can I do to help keep you on track?” If your teen can be consistent about making even a few of the changes suggested above, you might both be surprised at how quickly you can all reap the rewards of (more) sleep.

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