

Parents and caregivers share tips for helping children get more rest

BY CLAUDIA MILLER

When (my grandchildren) don't get enough sleep they're really grouchy," says Andrea Jones of Long Beach. "It's hard to get them up in the morning and they don't have a great day at school. When I pick up my grandson from (child care) at 6 pm, I tell him, 'We're going to have dinner, take a bath, do homework, and, if there's time, you can watch TV until 8 pm.'"

While experts agree sleep is important for children, a 2004 study finds many children don't get enough (see box). "Often when children act out, it's actually because they're overtired," says Loretta Jones, executive director of Healthy African American Families.

Parents and caregivers talk about how they help their children get more sleep.

Develop good sleeping habits

When Turlock mother of four Deborah Grim puts her five-month-old baby to bed, she says, "We listen to lullabies. I put him in the crib and have him look at his mobile. You can see his eyes getting drowsy."

"Put your child in the crib or bed while they're awake," rather than letting them fall asleep in the living room, advises Lisa Root, adult parenting coordinator of the Modesto Parent Resource Center. "Let them learn to fall asleep on their own, so they can fall asleep on their own in the middle of the night."

Babies should be put to sleep on their backs on a firm surface with no crib bumper guards or pillows, says Root. "Babies don't need a pillow until they're old enough to ask for one."

Develop a bedtime routine

Bedtime routines can be simple, says Nancy Lim Yee, program director at the Chinatown Child Development Center—something families can commit to on a nightly basis. After dinner, Yee's children had quiet playtime building with blocks, coloring, or watching television. Then they had a bath, put on pajamas, and had a story read by mom or dad before bedtime at 8 pm. "As my children got older," says Yee, "they got to help make decisions about the bedtime routine. We would say, 'You can read a chapter or two or play a game with your sibling, but then it's lights out.'"

"My son has been pretty easy to get to bed," says mom Janell Pineda of Orland, "because we've had the same routine for so long. After dinner, he has a bath, we

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—Andrea Jones

read stories, I turn off the light and say goodnight. Sometimes he gets up to go to the bathroom—he knows he can come give me a hug, but then he has to go right back to bed."

"Bedtime is between 7:30 and 7:45," says LA mother of two Lashun Willis. "They don't fight me on it because it's been that way forever." Her daughter recently started waking up at night, wanting her sippy cup—Willis tells her, "A sippy cup is for lunch or dinner but not in the middle of the night."

Getting ready for bed may also include making sure



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children have their “lovies,” a special stuffed animal, pillow, or blanket, says Loretta Jones. “If it helps them feel safe, let them have it. When you travel or go to a friend’s house in the evening, bring it so the child can fall asleep more easily,” she adds.

“There were days when things came up or when nothing worked,” recalls Yee, “but it’s important to be consistent. Some nights you will be too tired or things get too hectic to stick to the bedtime routine. But it’s important to say to your kids, ‘Tomorrow we’ll be back to normal.’”

Cope with challenges

When families live in crowded homes, it may be impossible to give children their own sleeping space. Yee says she works with families who live in single hotel rooms. Some of them turn out the lights and wait until the children are asleep to finish their day.

Other families have a parent who comes home from work at 9 pm and wants to have dinner with the children. “Families with older children (could) make sure homework is all done,” says Yee, “so shortly after dinner, the children can get to bed.”

When parents can’t be around at night, they can record themselves reading a bedtime story, says Loretta Jones. “It can be instantly soothing for the child to hear,” she says. “It takes them away from feeling lost to ‘someone loves me.’”

Soothe nighttime fears

“If (my children) went to bed stressed, they had nightmares,” says Yee, so her family talked about their day—including any scary movies—at dinner. “Acknowledging scary things was better than just putting your head under the covers and trying to sleep,” she recalls.

“When things didn’t go smoothly at night,” says Andrea Jones, “those were the nights my own kids had nightmares or woke up in the middle of the night. If my granddaughter has a nightmare, I go in with her, and pat her back, but she doesn’t get up.”

Take care of yourself, too

When parents feel stressed, “it’s important to get calm so (you) can be with (your) child,” says Loretta Jones. “Take your baby, wrap it up comfortably in a blanket, lay it on its back in a crib, and make a cup of tea.”

Grim says the best thing she does for herself is napping when her baby is resting. “When I’m calm and relaxed, he’s much more that way, also,” she says.

Seek help if needed

Root advises families to talk with their pediatrician if their child has problems sleeping or seems to be in pain or overly scared at bedtime. Health problems such as asthma can also make it harder for children to fall asleep.

Parents can also talk with family members, neighbors, and friends, says Loretta Jones—“There are supportive people all around who can help. Families (should) not be ashamed to ask.”

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO WE NEED?

AGE	SLEEP EACH DAY
0-3 months	10-18 hours
3-11 months	9-12 hours, with one or two 30 min-2 hr naps
1-3 years	12-14 hours
3-5 years	11-13 hours
5-12 years	10-11 hours
Teenagers	8.5-9.5 hours
Adults	8 hours

FOR MORE INFO: National Sleep Foundation, www.sleepfoundation.org