

GROWING UP

Poor Sleep Makes Behavior Worse in Kids

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

The mother clenches her teeth, lets out a sigh, and prepares for the homework battle with her son. It has become harder and harder to get him to complete the work he brings home from school. It was bad before because of her son's difficulty paying attention but he now is so moody that it can be difficult to be around him. The mother is beginning to think that her son might have some type of attention or mood disorder.

When looking at this particular situation, many people might agree with the mother and think that an attention or mood disorder is the likely cause of the boy's difficulties. While this may be part of the issue, a lack of sleep could be contributing to or making existing behaviors worse. Children who are getting an inadequate amount of sleep or a lack of quality sleep are at high risk of developing a range of negative behaviors. These behaviors include being inattentive, irritable, moody, and anxious. It can also impact school performance as children will have difficulty with memory and learning.

Spotting inadequate sleep in children is not always easy. Most parents know that they should try to get their infant or toddler 12-14 hours of sleep a day. However, once children reach school age, it becomes harder to let them wake up naturally with the hours they need due to getting to school on time in the morning. The result is that many elementary aged children get far less than the recommended 10 hours of sleep per night. It takes only one night of getting sub-optimal levels of sleep for it to start disrupting learning. Extended periods of inadequate sleep can compound problems as seen above.

Even if a child is getting an adequate amount of sleep, it can be of low quality. Children who snore or stop breathing in the night may be some of the 30% of children who have sleep problems. Other signs of poor quality sleepers include difficulty falling asleep, frequent wakings during the night, nightmares, and night terrors.

Before assuming that your child has a behavioral or mood disorder, look at how well he sleeps. Take a week and record how long your child sleeps during the week versus the weekend when he can sleep as long as he wants. If there is a big difference between the two times, your child probably needs more sleep during the week and an earlier bedtime. Put your child to bed and see how long it takes before he falls asleep. Once he has fallen asleep, check in every so often to see if your child stops breathing momentarily or is snoring. If you notice that your child is a poor quality sleeper, consult with your pediatrician to see if follow-up with a specialist might be necessary. By paying attention to children's sleep, we can help them live up to their full potential and not go into the day half-awake.

Biography:

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