

# Sleep in School-Aged Children (6–12 Years)

## WHAT TO EXPECT

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School-aged children typically need between 10 and 11 hours of sleep per night, but many average between 9 and 10 hours of sleep. Not getting enough sleep is becoming more common in this age group, often as a result of increasing school obligations (e.g., homework), extracurricular activities, increased evening use of electronics (television, computers, cell phones), and later bedtimes. Sleep problems are also common in the school-aged child. These include difficulty falling and staying asleep, sleepwalking, sleep terrors, teeth grinding, nighttime fears, nightmares, bedwetting, snoring, and noisy breathing. However, as children get older, parents often become less aware that their child is having sleep problems. Be sure and know the signs that indicate your child may not be getting enough sleep, including the following.

- **Moodiness:** Inadequate sleep may cause your school-aged child to be moody, irritable, and cranky, as well as to become frustrated or upset more easily.
- **Behavior problems:** School-aged children who do not get enough sleep are more likely to have behavior problems, such as noncompliance, aggressiveness, poor impulse control, and hyperactivity. Even just 30 to 60 minutes less sleep than he needs can affect your child's behavior.
- **Poor thinking skills:** Inadequate sleep may result in problems with attention, memory, decision-making, organization, and creativity, all of which are clearly important for success in school.
- **Dozing off:** School-aged children are normally wide awake during the day. This means that if they *are* falling asleep in class, in the car, or in front of the TV on a regular basis, *something is wrong!* Assume, until proven otherwise, that if this is happening to your child, that he is not getting enough sleep or the sleep he is getting is not good quality, or both.
- **Weight problems:** Many studies have now shown that there is a link between not getting enough sleep and being overweight or obese in both children and adults. This association is most likely related to the effects of sleep loss on chemical substances in the body that control hunger and appetite. That is, children who sleep less are hungrier and tend to eat more. They may also exercise less because they are tired. Being overweight is also an important risk factor for sleep apnea in children.

## HOW TO HELP YOUR SCHOOL-AGED CHILD SLEEP WELL

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- **Develop a regular sleep schedule:** Your child should go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day. Set (and stick to) a bedtime that ensures that your child gets enough sleep, preferably before 9:00 p.m.
- **Maintain a consistent bedtime routine:** School-aged children continue to benefit from a bedtime routine that is the same every night and includes calm and enjoyable activities, such as reading. Including one-on-one time with a parent is helpful in maintaining communication with your child and having a clear connection every day.
- **Set up a soothing sleep environment:** Make sure your child's bedroom is comfortable, dark, cool, and quiet. A nightlight is fine; a television, computer, or gaming system is not.

- **Make sleep a priority:** As school-aged kids become more and more involved in academic, social, athletic, and other activities, sleep often becomes less of a priority for families. Parents' work and activity schedules spilling over into the evening hours may also conflict with time for sleep, by pushing the dinner hour and homework time later and later. Older school-aged children may need adult help in managing their time in the evening, so they can get to bed at a reasonable hour.
- **Set limits:** If your school-aged child stalls at bedtime, be sure to set clear limits ahead of time, such as what time lights must be turned off and how many stories you will read together.
- **Turn off televisions, computers, and radios:** Television viewing, computer game playing, Internet use, and other stimulating activities just before or at bedtime will often result in sleep problems. Children also can become "dependent" upon the TV in order to fall asleep.
- **Avoid caffeine:** Caffeine can be found in sodas, coffee-based products, iced tea, energy drinks, and many other substances.
- **Contact your child's doctor:** Speak to your child's physician if your child has difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep, snores, experiences unusual awakenings, or has sleep problems that are causing disruption during the day.