

SLEEP & MENTAL HEALTH

When I don't get enough sleep, I end up in a crabby mood. I'm sure most of you can relate to that feeling. As adults, we may snap at people for no reason and then realize that we were irritable because we didn't get the sleep we needed the night before; we are able to apologize and change our behavior (and hopefully to make up for the lost sleep the following night). Well, not getting enough sleep affects children in the same way, but they are too young to understand or control their behavior.

When children are tired, they may become irritable, may engage in tantrums that last longer than usual, may have greater difficulty paying attention, and generally do not "act themselves." This is why it is so important to teach children good sleep habits from an early age; starting with learning to fall asleep on their own. Once children are able to fall asleep on their own, they will be able to stay asleep through the night. When parents stay with their children while they fall asleep, rock their children to sleep, drive them around in the car to get them to sleep, or otherwise help their children to sleep, problems develop when the children awake in the middle of the night. Because these children do not know how to fall asleep on their own, they require the same soothing to help them fall asleep again.

With the introduction of a healthy sleep routine and consistency in enforcing bedtime rules, these issues often resolve within one to two weeks. It can be emotionally difficult to enforce these bedtime rules because parents do not want to see their children upset and because it is easier to just help them. In the long run; though, it is worth the fight.

Here are some suggestions for developing a good sleep schedule:

- Bedtime should begin at least half-hour before "lights-out."
- Television should not be a part of the bedtime routine as, although television is thought of as a relaxing activity, it actually excites the mind causing children to have greater difficulty falling asleep. Instead, relaxing activities can include stretching, deep breathing, reading, or lying in bed and talking quietly about the day's activities.
- After getting in pajamas, using the toilet, and brushing teeth, an established bedtime routine can help children feel relaxed, comfortable, and secure after parents leave their room. This may include reading stories, singing lullabies, or guided imagery. Introduction of special blankets, stuffed animals, or other safe objects to sleep with should be allowed.
- In addition, parents may wish to use a sticker chart to reward their children for following the bedtime rules (e.g. stay in bed, fall asleep on own). Remember that consistency is important in establishing bedtime routines. With consistency, hopefully all parties involved will begin to sleep better, wake up with more energy, and just "be themselves."