

Consistent Bedtimes Improve Children's Behavior and Emotional Control

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Sleep is fundamental to children's overall health and development, affecting everything from brain development and learning to mood regulation and academic performance
- › During sleep cycles, NREM sleep repairs tissues and strengthens immunity, while REM sleep enables memory consolidation and learning, making both stages crucial for child development
- › A November 2024 study found that children with inconsistent bedtimes demonstrated poorer emotional regulation, struggling to manage their feelings and reactions effectively
- › Research also revealed that irregular sleep schedules led to increased impulsivity in children, with greater bedtime variability directly correlating to more impulsive behaviors
- › Strategies for better sleep include creating a calming sleeping environment, limiting blue light exposure, managing stress and addressing bedtime resistance in children

Ever find yourself at your wit's end dealing with your child's constant tantrums or struggles to focus during homework time? It's a common challenge for many parents. While there are many contributing factors behind these issues, there's a vital element that's often overlooked — sleep.

A good night's sleep isn't just about feeling rested; it's fundamental to a child's overall health, impacting everything from brain development and learning to mood regulation.

Inconsistent sleep patterns lead to a host of problems, affecting children's behavior, emotions and even their academic performance.

Establishing a consistent bedtime is key to ensuring your child gets the restorative sleep they need to stay focused, manage their emotions and thrive both at home and in school.

Sleep – The Brain's Nightly Reset Button

Sleep is not just a period of inactivity – it's an active process during which the brain goes through distinct stages, each with its own important function. These stages are broadly categorized into non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep.

During NREM sleep, the body repairs tissues, builds bones and muscle, and strengthens the immune system.¹ Meanwhile, REM sleep is when brain activity spikes, dreams occur and essential processes like memory consolidation and learning take place.² These sleep cycles are equally essential for children's development.

Disruptions caused by inconsistent bedtimes, external noises or other factors cause difficulties with concentration, memory and problem-solving the following day. Well-rested children are like sponges, ready to absorb new information. They focus more effectively on class, remember what they've learned and perform better on tests.

Research consistently links sleep quality to academic achievement.^{3,4,5}

Sleep deprivation also directly affects behavior by weakening the prefrontal cortex, the brain's control center for decision-making, impulse control and emotional regulation.⁶ When children get enough sleep, they manage emotions more effectively, experience fewer tantrums and display greater emotional resilience. They are better equipped to handle minor frustrations, cooperate with peers and build positive relationships.

For parents, this means less exhaustion and fewer conflicts, allowing more time for meaningful, positive activities with their children. In contrast, sleep-deprived children

struggle to follow instructions, become easily frustrated or irritable, or experience more frequent emotional outbursts.

These behaviors are often mistaken for defiance or poor discipline, when in reality, the root cause is lack of sleep. Insufficient sleep also increases the risk of symptoms associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and depression.⁷ Sufficient sleep plays a key role in preventing these issues by regulating the body's circadian rhythm.

The circadian clock is roughly a 24-hour cycle, which regulates various bodily functions, including sleep-wake cycles, hormone release and body temperature. Light and darkness are its primary cues; darkness triggers the production of melatonin, aka the sleep hormone, signaling the body to sleep, while light suppresses melatonin production to promote wakefulness.

Irregular bedtimes disrupt this rhythm, confusing the body's signals and making it harder for children to fall asleep and wake up consistently. This inconsistency also leads to "social jetlag," a phenomenon where sleep patterns shift significantly on weekends compared to weekdays.⁸ This shift further disrupts the circadian rhythm and makes it even harder for children to adjust to their weekday schedule.

Study Shows Consistent Sleep Timing Shapes Your Child's Behavior

When it comes to children's sleep, parents often worry about how many hours their kids are getting or whether they're sleeping soundly through the night. However, a November 2024 study published in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*⁹ emphasizes another important factor in children's development — a consistent bedtime schedule.

The study followed 143 children with an average age of 6.7 years, who were enrolled in the Penn State Intervention Nurses Start Infants Growing on Healthy Trajectories

(INSIGHT) study. Originally designed to address childhood obesity prevention, the research also examined how sleep timing, duration and quality affect behaviors.

Surprisingly, the authors found that neither the amount of sleep nor the overall sleep quality influence behavioral outcomes. Instead, it was the consistency of their sleep timing, particularly when they went to bed and the midpoint of their sleep, that played a major role. According to their findings:

*"Mean actigraphic sleep duration, quality, and timing were not associated with behavioral variables. By contrast, greater variability in sleep onset timing was associated with greater impulsivity ($B = 0.85, p = 0.004$) and poorer emotion regulation ($B = -0.65, p = 0.01$). Greater variability in sleep midpoint timing was associated with greater impulsivity ($B = 0.80, p = 0.03$)."*¹⁰

In other words, children with inconsistent bedtimes were noticeably more impulsive and struggled to regulate their emotions effectively. As bedtime variability increased, these difficulties became more pronounced, with emotional regulation and impulsive behaviors worsening. Similarly, irregularities in the midpoint of their sleep (when they were in the middle of their night's rest) increased impulsivity.

The study¹¹ also examined whether the impact of sleep irregularities varied depending on the type of environment and support the children received. The participants were divided into two groups – one participated in a responsive parenting program designed to create structured, supportive environments, while the other focused on home safety education without addressing parenting practices.

The results showed that children in the home safety group experienced stronger negative effects from inconsistent sleep schedules, including poor emotional regulation. Meanwhile, children in the responsive parenting group were less affected by sleep variability. Responsive parenting provides a stabilizing influence through predictable routines and emotional support, which counteract the disruptions caused by variable sleep timing.

"Parenting matters," said Orfeu Buxton, Ph.D., one of the study's lead researchers. "When parents establish clear structures and respond to their child's needs appropriately, children have better outcomes in weight regulation and behavior — even years later."¹²

Consistent Routines Help Your Child Maintain a Healthy Weight

The featured study¹³ revealed a connection between responsive parenting practices and children's ability to regulate their weight. By responding appropriately to infant behavior states, including drowsiness and sleeping, parents in the responsive parenting group helped their children maintain a healthier body mass index (BMI) through their first three years of life.

The program extended beyond weight management, teaching parents to recognize hunger and fullness cues and to let their children decide when they are satisfied. As children grew, parents were encouraged to establish routines and expectations around food, sleep and behavior to support healthy development.

Children in the responsive parenting group consistently displayed healthier weight trends than those in the home safety group. This suggests that routines, including those around bedtime, contribute to better metabolic health in addition to improving emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Other studies have shown disturbance in circadian rhythm impacts metabolism and appetite, leading to hormonal imbalances, such as increased ghrelin and reduced leptin levels, which drive hunger and cravings. Over time, these irregularities put children at risk of obesity and other metabolic disorders.¹⁴ As a parent, establishing consistent sleep and daily routines is essential to mitigate these outcomes and protect your child's health.

"Every parent can establish clear standards and routines for their children," said Buxton. "They can respond appropriately and promptly to children's needs. We now have eight years of research on the INSIGHT project demonstrating that when parents are responsive to their children, they raise healthier children."¹⁵

Tips to Building the Foundation for Consistent, Restful Bedtimes

Establishing a consistent bedtime schedule is the cornerstone of healthy sleep habits. Setting a regular bedtime and wake-up time – and maintaining this schedule as consistently as possible, even on weekends – will help regulate your child's internal clock.

The amount of sleep children need depends on their age. Preschoolers typically require 10 to 13 hours of sleep, school-aged children need 9 to 12 hours, and teenagers benefit from 8 to 10 hours.¹⁶ Making sure your child gets the recommended amount of sleep for their age is essential for their overall health and development.

If your child consistently struggles to fall asleep at their current bedtime, gradually adjust it earlier in 15-minute increments to give their body time to adapt.¹⁷ Pairing this adjustment with a calming and predictable bedtime routine will help ease the transition. To support your efforts, here are some effective strategies for improving your child's sleep schedule and quality:

- 1. Create a restful sleep environment** – Make your child's bedroom a sanctuary for sleeping. Keep the room quiet, dark and cool to promote uninterrupted rest. The optimal temperature for sleeping is between 60 and 68 degrees Fahrenheit (15 to 20 degrees Celsius). Blackout curtains or a white noise machine will also help create a soothing environment.

Remove any distractions such as TV and electronic devices; reducing noise and light helps the body enter deeper sleep stages. Consider investing in comfortable and supportive mattress and pillows that suit your child's needs. If their mattress is over 9 to 10 years old, consider replacing it to ensure optimal support and comfort.

- 2. Limit exposure to light before bedtime** – Blue light from phones, tablets, and computers suppresses melatonin, making it harder for your child to fall asleep. Encourage your child to stop using screens at least an hour before bedtime. Instead, focus on calming activities like reading a story or practicing mindfulness.

Dimming the lights in the evening signals the body that it's time to wind down, promoting better sleep.

- 3. Manage stress through relaxation techniques** – Stress and anxiety make it difficult for children to fall asleep. Teach your child simple relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation or gentle stretches, to help them unwind before bed. These practices not only reduce stress but also improve focus and emotional regulation.
- 4. Eliminate electromagnetic fields (EMFs) in their bedroom** – EMFs disrupt the production of melatonin and cause other negative effects. To reduce exposure, unplug electronic devices and turn off Wi-Fi in your home before bedtime. Some experts even recommend pulling your circuit breaker before going to bed to kill all the power in your house.
- 5. Encourage regular physical activity** – Engaging in regular physical activity, such as outdoor play or sports, will help your child fall asleep more easily and soundly. However, exercise triggers the release of cortisol, a hormone that interferes with melatonin production. Make sure your child finishes any vigorous physical activity at least three hours before bedtime to avoid disrupting their sleep schedule.
- 6. Address bedtime resistance** – Reluctance or refusal to go to bed at the designated time is a common challenge, especially with younger children. Set clear boundaries and expectations to minimize this resistance. Take the time to understand any underlying reasons for their reluctance, such as anxiety or overstimulation. Use positive reinforcement, like praising your child for following their bedtime routine, to encourage cooperation.
- 7. Try Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)** – This technique is a form of psychological acupressure, based on the same energy meridians used in traditional acupuncture for more than 5,000 years to treat physical and emotional ailments, but without the invasiveness of needles. It's highly effective in reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Check out the video below for basic steps on how to do EFT for relaxation and destressing.

Prioritizing Sleep – A Path to Brighter Days

The connection between stable bedtimes and improved behavior, emotional control and overall well-being in children is undeniable. Consistent sleep provides the foundation for children to thrive in all areas of their lives.

Establishing consistent sleep schedules, creating relaxing bedtime routines, and addressing any underlying sleep challenges are essential for promoting healthy sleep in children. For parents looking to implement these changes, it's important to start small and be patient.

Changes don't happen overnight, but consistent effort will pay off. Be patient with the process and celebrate small victories along the way. Involve your children in the process of creating a bedtime routine. This gives them a sense of ownership and makes them more likely to cooperate. Discuss the importance of sleep with them in age-appropriate terms and let them choose elements of their bedtime routine, like which book to read or which pajamas to wear.

Remember that prioritizing sleep is not just about avoiding tantrums or improving grades; it's an investment in your child's present and future health and happiness. By helping them get consistent, uninterrupted sleep, you are setting them up for success in all aspects of their lives.

Sources and References

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