



Good sleep is vital for healthy growth and development in infants and children.

Children who develop sleep problems are prone to mood disorders, anti-social behaviour, growth delays and learning problems.

Children respond positively to regular bedtimes, a comfortable and secure bedroom environment, and a relaxed and happy pre-bedtime routine.

Sleep Problems

in children & adolescents



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ONE IN THREE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A SLEEP PROBLEM

Sleep problems are widespread among young Australian people, affecting about 30 percent of those 18 and under.

The knock-on effects are many, with sleep deprived children and young people more likely to be irritable, impulsive, hyperactive or sleepy. Their physical growth can suffer, as can their learning, with night-time issues responsible for a poor attention span, slower speech development and trouble retaining information.

These problems are often overlooked or misinterpreted. Parents find it difficult to detect that something is wrong. Just five percent of children with sleep problems are ever assessed by their family doctor, and even fewer by sleep specialists.

This is largely because most sleep-deprived children do not look lethargic or “droopy eyed” when they are tired. Tired toddlers and preschoolers actually tend to be overly active and extremely “wound up”. Unsurprisingly, many are frequently mislabeled as having a behavioural problem like ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) or “The Terrible Twos”.

THE WOOLCOCK IS HERE TO HELP

Most sleep problems can be treated and either cured or managed by a doctor or sleep specialist.

The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research operates Australia’s only specialist Paediatric and Adolescent Sleep Service which assesses and manages all sleep disorders in babies, young children and teenagers.

SNORING TODDLERS

Snoring is the most common sleep-related issue affecting under fives. It is most common if the tonsils and/or adenoids are enlarged, causing some blockage of the upper airway in sleep.

About 6% of children between 2 and 5 years of age snore on a regular basis.

In some, but not all of these children, this blockage limits oxygen flow to the lungs, disrupting sleep and leaving the child sleep deprived. This condition is called Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA). Sleep specialists can accurately assess which snoring children have OSA and cure the problem by surgically removing the adenoids and tonsils.



Other sleep issues affecting young children include sleep terrors, sleep walking and talking, and nightmares.

UNFOCUSED KIDS

About 30 percent of Australian school children have sleep problems, including difficulties falling asleep or waking up frequently overnight. In a third of cases, parents rate the problems as either moderate or severe.

Primary school-aged children with a sleeping problem are more likely to have problems in the classroom. A tired child has difficulty focusing on activities and processing new information. Without a good night’s sleep, the brain struggles to consolidate each day’s learning and retain memory. Teachers report poor short-term memory in tired children, that is, teachings go “in one ear and out the other”.

Studies show that sleep problems are nine times more common in the bottom academic 10% of primary classes than they are in the top 10% of students.

MOODY TEENS

Up to 70 percent of Australian adolescents aged 12 to 17 have a sleep problem.

Children of this age need just over nine hours sleep each night on average but most are getting considerably less. A combination of factors are responsible, including:

- High exposure to electronic screens at night e.g iPads, mobile phones, televisions, laptops, computers
- School pressures and expectations which eat into sleep time
- The tendency to develop a late body clock, causing profound morning tiredness
- The craving to maintain social electronic connectivity through the night (termed FOMO-Fear of Missing Out)

Sleep deprivation has many debilitating side effects like learning problems, risk-taking behaviours, family disharmony, school absenteeism, poor self esteem, depression and obesity. People who are sleep deprived in adolescence are more likely to have psychological problems in adulthood, with higher rates of anxiety, drug abuse and suicide in this group. The US Department of Health recognised the severity of the situation in 2011 when it formally listed adolescent sleep deprivation as a major public health issue.

Adolescent sleep problems are typically misinterpreted as mood disorders. This is, of course, because teenagers become moody when they are sleep deprived. Just two percent of sleep-deprived teens recognise their sleep problem as a medical issue and seek professional help.

As a group, Australian adolescents rank as the third most sleep deprived in the world.

Adolescent sleep problems fall into three categories, though for many teens a combination are in play.

- Insufficient sleep hours
- Delayed Sleep Phase Disorder (DSPD - otherwise known as a late body clock)
- Psychological Insomnia (poor sleep due to psychological factors)

WHERE CAN I GO FOR HELP?

The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research has developed a comprehensive Paediatric and Adolescent Sleep Service which treats sleep disorders in young people from birth to 18 years.

This includes Australia’s only interdisciplinary sleep clinic for young people, where Sleep Paediatricians, Paediatric Ear, Nose and Throat Surgeons and Adolescent Sleep Psychologists work together to provide a comprehensive service under one roof.

Adolescents can be assessed either by face-to-face consultation, or via our new online sleep management program, SleepShack (www.sleepshack.com.au).

Specialists can diagnose and treat all sleep issues, including Obstructive Sleep Apnea, Delayed Sleep Phase Disorder, insomnia, restless legs syndrome and sleep walking.

The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research is a not-for-profit organisation.

If you are interested in further information about becoming involved in our research studies or donations, please visit our website www.woolcock.org.au.

Your contribution will make a difference.
Thank you for your support.