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Consistency is key

How to encourage good sleep habits for children during the end-of-year holidays

The Witness · 5 Dec 2024 · 8

During the holidays, it's easy for your child's sleep routine to get a little out of sync.

"School-aged children typically need around nine to 12 hours of sleep each night, according to the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP), but late nights, travelling, and sleepovers can throw things off balance," said Murray Hewlett, CEO of Affinity Health.

Here's how to keep your children on track with good sleep habits, even during the holidays.

STICK TO A CONSISTENT BEDTIME

Even when holiday plans make it tempting to let bedtimes slide, it's essential to maintain some consistency. Research shows that children who follow a regular bedtime routine sleep better and wake up less at night.

Try to keep bedtimes within the same hour every evening, even if it's later than usual. If your child stays up late one night, help them get back on track the next day by returning to their normal bedtime.

CREATE A CALMING BEDTIME ROUTINE

Bed time routines aren't just for toddlers — kids of all ages benefit from a relaxing wind-down before sleep. Calm activities like reading a book, listening to soft music, or taking a warm bath can signal to their bodies that it's time to rest.

On the flip side, avoid screen time in the hour before bed, as the blue light from devices can interfere with melatonin, the hormone that makes us sleepy.

WATCH OUT FOR SUGARY TREATS

The holidays often include sweet treats, but increased sugar intake can decrease sleep quality. Instead of sugary snacks before bed, choose healthier options like fruit, yogurt or whole-grain crackers to avoid night-time sugar rushes.

MAKE THEIR BEDROOM SLEEP-FRIENDLY

A comfort able sleep environment can make a world of difference. The Sleep Foundation recommends keeping your child's bedroom cool, dark and quiet. If holiday noise is an issue, a fan or white noise machine can help block distractions.

The bedding should be soft and breathable for the skin.

Pillows should also offer the proper support, helping maintain a natural alignment without being too firm or high.

TAKE THE KIDS OUTSIDE

Fresh air and daylight do wonders for sleep. Daylight regulates the body's circadian rhythm — the internal clock that tells us when to sleep and wake.

Encourage your children to spend time out doors, especially in the morning, to help their body clocks stay in sync. Active play during the day can also help them burn off energy, making bed time easier.

KEEP NAPS IN CHECK

While naps are great for younger children, long naps late in the day can interfere with night-time sleep. To avoid this, keep naps in the afternoon under an hour. This way, they'll still be ready for bed at night.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Children pick up on their parents' habits, so they're more likely to do the same if they see you prioritising sleep. Stick to your bedtime routine, limit your screen time in the evening,

and prioritise sleep. When children understand that sleep is important for everyone, they're more likely to embrace it.

HANDLE SLEEP REGRESSIONS WITH PATIENCE

Even with the best routine, children may experience periods of sleep regression, especially when holiday excitement is in full swing. If your child starts waking up more often or having trouble falling asleep, gently guide them back to their routine. Consistency is key, but so is flexibility when necessary.

TALK ABOUT SLEEP IN A POSITIVE WAY

Explain to your children why sleep is important. Let them know that getting enough sleep will help them feel energised for the next day's adventures. Keep it light, so they associate sleep with feeling good.

ADDRESS NIGHTMARES OR FEARS

Holiday stress or excitement, unfamiliar environments while travelling, and even specific holiday stories can sometimes trigger nightmares. If your child seems anxious at night, offer them comfort. A night light, soft music or leaving the bedroom door slightly open can help them feel more secure.

EASE BACK INTO ROUTINE AFTER THE HOLIDAYS

Once the holidays are over, it's important to gradually get your child into a more structured sleep routine. If necessary, start moving bedtimes earlier in small steps. — Affinity Health.