

Teens Sleeping Too Much, Or Not Enough? Parents Can Help

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Of parents who tell pollsters their teens have trouble sleeping, 23 percent say the kids are waking up at night worried about their social lives. A third are worried about school. All-night access to electronic devices only aggravates the problem, sleep scientists say.

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Within three days of starting high school this year, my ninth-grader could not get into bed before 11 p.m. or wake up by 6 a.m. He complained he couldn't fall asleep but felt foggy during the school day and had to reread lessons a few times at night to finish his homework. And forget morning activities on the weekends — he was in bed.

We're not the only family struggling to get restful shut-eye.

"What parents are sharing with us is that the 'normal life' of a typical American high schooler is interfering with sleep," says [Sarah Clark](#), co-director of C.S. Mott Children's Hospital [National Poll on Children's Health](#) at the University of Michigan.

In the [poll](#) of 2,000 parents from various ethnic groups and backgrounds that Clark and her team published this month, 1 in 6 parents say their teen experiences frequent sleep problems — "having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep 3 or more nights per week."

More than half the parents say it's because their teens won't get off their electronic devices, and 43 percent blame irregular schedules with homework and activities.

A significant percentage of parents say their kids worry about school (31 percent), and 23 percent say their teens stay up worrying about their social lives.

It's likely that the numbers of teens who have trouble sleeping is even higher than the poll of parents suggests, Clark says, because kids can hide their nighttime electronics use and parents may not frequently check in on older children.

How can parents help? Start with knowing what kids need.

The average American teenager gets [seven hours](#) of sleep a night, wedging it in between homework, outside activities, dinner and maybe a job. But research [suggests](#) teens need more like nine hours. Unfortunately, even their bodies work against them, says [Mary Carskadon](#), a longtime sleep researcher and professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University. As children grow into the middle and teen years, they are naturally inclined to [go to bed later](#) and sleep later in the morning. But an early school start time doesn't allow it.



"If kids' body clocks are shifting later and the school is starting earlier, there's no time left to recover," Carskadon says.

She and Clark have evidence-based tips for weary teens and their parents:

- **Put electronics away and out of reach.** Research has long shown that screen time interferes with good sleep because [it's stimulating](#), and those "[blue light filters](#)" that minimize the most troublesome part of the spectrum won't help much if you're stressed out. So do whatever it takes to make sleep hours electronics-free. "If I were an entrepreneur, my get-rich-quick scheme would be the family tech lockbox," says Carskadon. (There are already a few [phone lockers](#) in the works or [on the market](#) that may do the trick.)
- **Instill a regular bedtime routine.** Try to turn the lights out at around the same time and wake up at the same time, even on weekends, because the evidence shows you can't really "make up" missed sleep [on the weekends](#).
- **Sleep masks are useful, but avoid long naps.** Sleep masks can help create an environment conducive to sleep, says Carskadon, as can trying to prevent sleepy kids from taking long, late afternoon naps. A 20-minute nap [might be refreshing](#), but longer sleep sessions during the day can make it harder to get good rest at night. "The kids who struggle most at night are the ones who will be falling asleep in school, going to the nurse's office, and pouring a bowl of Cheerios and falling asleep in them," Carskadon says.
- **Limit caffeine — even more than you already do.** After school, many teens grab a soda or an energy drink to power through the rest of the afternoon. But this just makes going to bed on time more difficult, which, in turn, makes the

next day harder. The disruptions add up. In the Mott survey, 54 percent of parents had their teens limit caffeine in the evening, notes Clark, although she suggests cutting it back earlier in the day or even completely.

- **Pull back on the crammed schedule.** This is antithetical to what many parents of high school students and some students themselves think they should do to get into college. But does your teen really need to star in the school play, run for student council and be the starting quarterback for the high school football team? "Pick one," says Carskadon.
- **Teach time management.** If you don't have four hours straight to get homework done at night, break it up into chunks. "If you have 45 minutes before your activity, go to the library and get one or two subjects out of the way," Clark suggests.
- **Before trying a drugstore sleep aid, talk to your doctor.** The Mott survey suggests parents frequently turn to remedies like melatonin and over-the-counter drugs like Tylenol PM or NyQuil. But Clark encourages parents and teens to discuss these with a physician first. Melatonin isn't always gentle or effective, and scientists still [don't know much](#) about its long-term effects, according to the National Institutes of Health. And the heavy use of OTC drugs can be habit-forming and [hard on the liver](#).
- **Pursue policy changes.** Most sleep scientists say it would be healthier for older children to [start school later](#) in the morning than most U.S. school districts do. The California Legislature [passed a bill](#) last month requiring most middle schools and high schools to start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. by 2021, but Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed it on Thursday. Such a change nationally won't come easily. "The school start time issue is very fraught," Carskadon notes. Many teachers are fighting it, and working parents may not be able to shift their schedules and other child care obligations.

Meanwhile, Clark and Carskadon say, the most effective thing we parents can do is listen to our kids — talk with them about their sleep challenges and help them set a regular sleep schedule. It's never too early (or too late) to find healthy ways to relieve [daytime stresses](#) that can disrupt sleep at night, whatever your age.

Best idea yet, parents: We can set a good example, by putting our own electronics away — really away — at bedtime.

CorrectionSept. 23, 2018

An earlier version of this story incorrectly said the California legislation on school start times was awaiting the governor's signature. Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed the bill on Thursday.