

Sleep Disturbances: What's A Family To Do?

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Getting a good night's sleep is important for a number of reasons. Trying to prevent having a tired, cranky child in the morning is just one. The impact of sleep difficulties on the quality of life for both children and parents can be significant. It is reported that approximately 20 to 30 percent of preschool and school-aged children experience some form of sleep disturbance (Brown Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter). This can take different forms that include difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, and night terrors.

Sleep disturbances have been linked to a number of negative consequences on children's daytime functioning, including their social and emotional well-being. In the corollary to sleep problems, one study found that a greater amount of nighttime sleep was associated with less aggression in preschoolers (Lavigne, et al., 1999). Other studies have found similar results in older children as well.

Sleep disturbance has been linked to attention problems and impulsivity in children. For example, children with obstructive sleep apnea often display symptoms consistent with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and studies have shown an abatement of ADHD symptoms upon correction of the sleep apnea.

Mood disturbance has also been shown to co-occur with sleep problems. While sleep problems are a classic symptom of depression, it may be that the sleep issue is a precursor to the depression. Recent thinking suggests that sleep and mood disturbance may have a common etiology based in the development of the brain structure. At this stage of understanding, it is reasonable to investigate the interplay between these two issues.

In school aged children, a linkage has also been made between difficulties in learning and sleep disturbance. Basic science has shown the necessity between adequate sleep and neural processes that are integral to memory consolidation and learning. One study that manipulated sleep opportunity in a sample of healthy school-aged children found that sleep restriction had a direct effect on teacher-rated attention and academic performance.

Sleep disturbance is an equal opportunity issue. The results are shared equally between the child with the sleep issue and the parent(s). A recent poll by the National Sleep Foundation (2004) found that 53 percent of parents are awakened by their child at least once per week, and 19 percent experience daytime sleepiness (Boergers et al., 2007), maternal mood disturbance, stress, and fatigue (Meltzer & Mindell, 2007).

It's easy to understand the direct link between a child's sleep disturbance and the parents' fatigue. However, there is an element that may complicate this picture further and that is the interplay between parents' sleep style and the child's sleep. For instance, it is possible that a child's sleep problem may stem from a mechanism of modeling around lack of consistent bedtime. It may also be that there are certain genetic linkages and vulnerabilities to particular sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea.

If a child is experiencing daytime behavior problems or mood disturbances, it's important to assess if it is stemming from an underlying sleep disorder and to seek treatment. There are very effective behavioral and medical treatments available.

