

Let Teenagers Sleep In

Starting schools before 8:30 a.m. shows a tragic disregard for both the mental health of children and for science.

By Henry Nicholls

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This article has been updated to reflect news developments.

A fresh-faced batch of teenagers just began a new school year, but will they get the most out of it? In the mornings, many are forced to get to school much too early. And at night, ubiquitous screens are a lure that's hard to resist. This double whammy is a perfect lesson in sleep deprivation.

Three out of every four students in grades 9 to 12 fail to sleep the minimum of eight hours that the American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends for their age group. And sleep deprivation is unremittably bad news. Anyone who talks about sleep as if it's some kind of inconvenience and getting less of it is a virtue should be challenged. These people are dangerous.

At its most basic, insufficient sleep results in reduced attention and impaired memory, hindering student progress and lowering grades. More alarmingly, sleep deprivation is likely to lead to mood and emotional problems, increasing the risk of mental illness. Chronic sleep deprivation is also a major risk factor for obesity, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and cancer. As if this weren't enough, it also makes falling asleep at the wheel much more likely.

It is important to understand why teenagers have a particularly hard time getting enough sleep, and what adults need to do to help.

First, a reminder of the basic biology: After puberty, adolescents are no longer the morning larks of their younger years. They become rewired as night owls, staying awake later and then sleeping in. This is not part of a feckless project to frustrate parents, but is driven by changes in the way the brain responds to light.

New technology habits aren't helping. More teenagers now turn to activities involving screens at night. According to a report this year from the Pew Research Center, some 95 percent of children aged 13 to 17 now have access to a smartphone, up from 37 percent in 2012 and 73 percent in 2015. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey from 2017 reveals that 43 percent of high-school students are playing computer or video games for more than three hours on an average school night. Given the binge viewing encouraged by the likes of Netflix and YouTube and the pressure to nurture social networks like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, the total screen time for youngsters is probably well in excess of six hours a day, on average.

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The growth in screen time is particularly problematic for sleep. Not only does it eat into the time available for rest, but the blue light emitted by LEDs, TVs, tablets and smartphones suppresses the body's secretion of melatonin, the hormone that signals it's time to sleep. Overdosing on screens at night effectively tells the brain it's still daytime, delaying the body's cues to sleep even further.

Parents should set real limits on screen time, model responsible use of devices and praise children who show signs of regulating their own media consumption. In the hour before bedtime, there should be a moratorium on bright lights in the home, avoiding devices and harsh LED bulbs often found in kitchens and bathrooms.

Excessive screen use is compounded by a dangerous tradition: starting high school abnormally early. Based on data available from 2015, 86 percent of high schools started before 8:30 a.m., and one in 10 high schools had a start time before 7:30 a.m. Prying a teenager out of bed at 6 a.m. to get to school is the equivalent of waking an adult at 4 a.m. The brain will be at its least active in the 24-hour cycle, which explains the monosyllabic grunts of teenagers as they lumber to the school bus.

In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle and high schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m., a policy now backed by the American Medical Association, the C.D.C. and many other health organizations.

Whenever schools have managed the transition to a later start time, students get more sleep, attendance goes up, grades improve and there is a significant reduction in car accidents. The RAND Corporation estimated that opening school doors after 8:30 a.m. would contribute at least \$83 billion to the national economy within a decade through improved educational outcomes

and reduced car crash rates. The Brookings Institution calculates that later school start times would lead to an average increase in lifetime earnings of \$17,500.

Since 2014, several states have passed legislation related to school start times. In August, California lawmakers passed a bill that would have gone further. By 2021, most middle and high schools across the state would have had to start at 8:30 a.m. or later.

It was landmark legislation, according to Terra Ziporyn Snider of the grass-roots organization Start School Later, which has been campaigning for change since 2011. “It is becoming less acceptable to run schools at unhealthy hours, and this bill reflects that sentiment,” she said. But California’s governor, Jerry Brown, vetoed the bill on Thursday amid opposition from local officials, a deeply regrettable decision. It shows a tragic disregard for both the mental health of children and for science.

But Ms. Ziporyn Snider remains upbeat: “Eventually a bill like this, created in the best interests of children, will pass. It’s only a matter of time.”

Parents need to be vocal about the reasons change is so important, joining forces with community leaders, sleep scientists, health professionals and educators to put school start times on the local, then state agendas.

Changing the operating hours of an institution so central to the community is far from easy. It requires strong leadership and adjustments by school bus companies and businesses offering services like child care and extracurricular clubs. But despite the upheaval involved, making such a shift would pay off in the long run. It is unthinkable that a school should operate with asbestos in the ceilings, with no central heating in winter or with rats in the kitchen. Starting school before 8:30 a.m. should be equally unacceptable.

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COMMENT OF THE MOMENT

Times Pick

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USA | Sept. 20

My teens are not up late playing video games, but doing homework...almost all on a computer. They aren't home from mandatory sports until 6pm at the earliest. Neither of them will be home tonight until after 8 due to play practice and an away game. As a parent, I just don't see enough hours in the day for them to do what they need to do. Don't even get me started on the college applications...

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