



## Healthy Sleep Habits in Children and Adolescents: Why They Matter and What Can We Do?

Accumulating scientific evidence shows that the quantity and quality of sleep play an important role in a child's development. Children need sufficient sleep of good quality for optimal cognitive function, especially memory. Sleep quality has also been linked with metabolic health and growth. Early childhood sleep problems are predictive of such problems in older children and adolescents, emphasising the need to act early in promoting healthy sleep behaviour.

- **Cross-cultural research has consistently shown that Asian children sleep less in comparison to Western populations.** Between 12 and 24 months, night sleep duration in Singapore children tends to lag behind comparison children, pointing to potential environmental and cultural differences affecting sleep. This included later bedtimes, shorter total sleep, increased parental perception of sleep problems, and a greater likelihood of room sharing. Preschoolers in Asia have later bedtimes by more than 1 ½ hours, more sleep disturbances, are more likely to bed-share or room-share, and continue to nap throughout the preschool years, compared to children in the West.
- **Screen time further contributes to lower sleep quality and duration, and preschool children who spend more than one hour per day watching television have a greater risk of sleep disorders.** Sleep deprivation has been associated with hyperactivity, inattention, poorer school readiness, and may contribute to overweight and obesity.

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- **Insufficient sleep in school-age children has been associated with poorer academic performance, sleepiness during the day, depressive symptoms and poor social competence.** 65% of school-age children in Singapore do not meet the recommended nine to 11 hours of sleep on school days.
- **Changes in circadian rhythms in adolescents contribute to their later bedtimes and wake times. Successive nights of insufficient sleep can negatively impact mood and cognitive functions.** Adolescents sleeping less than 7 hours per night had poorer self-rated health, greater likelihood of being overweight and more symptoms of depression and thoughts of self-harm, compared to those sleeping between 8 to 10 hours. Barriers to healthy sleep include later preferred sleep timing, lower parental supervision of bedtime, longer homework/study time, travel time and early school start time.
- **Poor sleeping habits during childhood and adolescence may potentially persist into adulthood, increasing the risk of mental health conditions, childhood obesity and related chronic health conditions.** Improving sleep at the population level could mitigate these in later life.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

Improving sleep behaviour in children and adolescents would help to optimise human health and potential in Singapore. Informed by scientific evidence, these recommendations may help to achieve this critical goal:

- Public health interventions to improve sleep in childhood and adolescence require a multi-sectoral systems approach involving the health and education domains.
- Such interventions should be based on holistic "healthy day" approaches that recognise how parent and caregiver behaviours may shape children's sleep habits, and the important connection between children's sleep, screen use and physical activity.
- A public health campaign by health promotion agencies is needed to help raise awareness of the importance of good sleep among parents/caregivers, adolescents, school leaders, teachers and policy makers and to better understand the issues and challenges faced by parents, caregivers and youth. This should be accompanied by practical guidance on strategies to improve sleep behaviours.
- Good sleep habits should be established as early as possible, beginning with anticipatory guidance during antenatal visits, and extending to universal screening for sleep problems in young children.
- Educational policies around school start times and after-school workload should be carefully considered to support improved sleep, especially in older children and adolescents.