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TIPS ON HANDLING  
BACK-TO-SCHOOL BEDTIME BLUES

DALLAS -- The annual bedtime battle will break out soon as alarm clocks signal the end of summer freedom and the return to school-year schedules.

It's all part of a natural reaction to the sudden change from late-to-bed, late-to-rise vacation schedules to the early-to-bed, early-to-rise variety that the school year requires. However, if a student fails to adjust after a week or two, falling asleep in class or staying up most of the night and not being able to get up for school in the morning, it may be a sign that something more serious is wrong, says a Dallas pediatric sleep specialist.

Simple sleep adjustment problems begin with vacation schedules that permit youngsters to stay up late on summer evenings and sleep the next morning. "When children or teenagers are allowed to set their own schedules, they tend to go to bed later and get up later--and there's nothing wrong with that," said Dr. John Herman, clinical associate professor of psychiatry at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. When school begins and the returning students must get up earlier, the shock to their systems can be compared to jet lag or the sudden changes of Daylight Saving Time. "It's as though he or she is on 'California time' in the Central Time Zone. It's inconvenient, but it usually corrects rapidly," said Herman.

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Herman, a psychologist, heads one of the few accredited pediatric sleep-disorder centers in the country, at Children's Medical Center of Dallas. In that capacity he diagnoses and treats children and adolescents who have a broad spectrum of sleep-related complaints including respiratory problems, narcolepsy (falling asleep suddenly in the middle of activity), insomnia, bedwetting, extreme daytime sleepiness and disturbance in the body's circadian rhythm pattern. Circadian rhythms include the timing of our patterns of sleeping and waking, activity and rest, hunger and eating, as well as cycles in body temperature and hormone release.

Herman pointed out that younger children--from the first to about the eighth grade--rarely remember anything between the moment of falling asleep and awakening. Beginning in early adolescence sleep is more fragmented than that of younger children. Teens' busy schedules include not only school but homework, after-school jobs or chores around the home, school activities and two potential sleep villains--cars and telephones--and there aren't enough hours for sleep. Also, many teens tend to be "nightowls," naturally preferring a late-to-bed, late-to-rise schedule year-round. During the summer months the teenager has more freedom and generally sets his or her bedtime. Even when parents enforce curfews and "lights out," few stay awake long enough themselves to make sure the teenagers are not up listening to headphones or talking on the phone. Staying up late leads to late rising and daytime sleepiness, but neither is as obvious during the lazy days of summer.

There are four major sleep problems that may be masked by summer schedules, according to Herman's observations. If a family finds itself battling over sleep habits that cause daytime sleepiness into the school year,

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some of the following problems may be occurring:

1. **Delayed-phase sleep syndrome.** People with a delayed phase sleep state have a disturbance in their circadian rhythm cycle. Their bodies are simply working on a different clock from everyone else's. Fortunately, new treatments using intensive light therapy that resets the person's circadian rhythms have recently been developed, and the technique of readjusting a personal time clock by moving the bedtime later an hour at a time usually works well, but may require a parent's help.

One of Herman's patients, Reba (not her real name), a nine-year-old gymnast, was impossible to awaken on school-day mornings. She even fell asleep in the bathtub and at the breakfast table. Reba kept sleeping through her morning classes but was a bundle of energy in the afternoon. "By bedtime Reba was wound-up and couldn't fall asleep until 11 or 12 o'clock, in spite of being put to bed at 9," Herman said. It took the cooperation of her mother and about two weeks to change Reba's sleep clock to a schedule compatible with school by moving her bedtime two hours later each consecutive night until the proper bedtime was achieved.

2. **Sleep-onset insomnia.** Many parents don't realize that children and adolescents can have fragmented sleep or insomnia and need treatment for it just like adults.

3. **Depression.** Sleepless nights, often coupled with daytime sleeping, may be a symptom of depression, which is as serious in children and adolescents as it is in adults. One 17-year-old--let's call him Trevor--slept past noon on weekends and was difficult to wake up in the mornings. He was too tired to complete his homework most of the time and was doing poorly in

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school. Trevor insisted that everything was fine; he was just tired all the time. When the family doctor could find no physical cause for Trevor's condition, his mother brought him to the sleep lab at Children's Medical Center for Herman's evaluation. Diagnosis: depression.

**4. Antisocial behavior.** Some adolescents' "acting out" may be overlooked during summer because the parents and the child are literally on different schedules. But come fall, bedtime and getting up for school can become the battlefield between parents and an adolescent who won't conform to the norms expected of a student.

But "parents should not panic," Herman said. All children's sleep problems aren't pathological by any means. Usually transitional sleep difficulties that cause "back to school blues" and family battles can be worked out quickly by following these tips from Herman.

- The way to change a child's bedtime is to alter his or her wake-up time, he said. Ideally, parents should try to start changing youngsters' bedtimes a week or two in advance, so that the new schedule will be in place before school starts. However, Herman advises parents not to worry about their child's not getting enough sleep for a few nights of school if an early schedule change is not possible. "It won't hurt anything if the child gets only four hours of sleep for a night or two. Then in the morning you can point out that the reason he or she is having trouble getting up is that bedtime was so late," he said.

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- Expect a gradual adjustment and don't pressure a child to go to sleep.

This will only add to the child's anxiety and contribute to keeping him or her awake longer, Herman said. "Remember that children are nervous about going back to school--especially the first day. While a few may 'zonk off' to sleep the night before, most will be staring at the ceiling for hours," the psychologist pointed out.

- If it's a youngster's first day of school or the first day in a new school, Herman suggests a visit before school starts. Parents should make sure a child knows where to go the next day. A teenager may be encouraged to explore the new school on his or her own.
- Remember what has caused problems on school mornings in the past and try to head these situations off by planning ahead or discussing them the night before.
- Don't make going to bed a punishment or add to the pressure by saying, "You know you have to get up in six hours."

If the transition is not working out after a couple of weeks, then perhaps help should be sought through your pediatrician, family doctor, sleep specialist or counselor, Herman said.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.