

UT News

Office of Medical Information
The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235
214/688-3404

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CONTACT: Ann Harrell
OFFICE: 214/688-3404
HOME: 214/520-7509
CONTACT: Diane Adell
OFFICE: 214/688-3404
HOME: 214/739-0032

****Back to school time brings "bedtime blues"
to parents, children

DALLAS -- Come September, many parents and children alike will suffer from an annual malady -- "the bedtime blues." Otherwise peaceful families who have enjoyed extra time together during vacations will suddenly split into two armed camps: parents vs. children. The reason is the immediate necessity for changes from the late-to-bed, late-to-rise vacation schedule to an early-to-bed, early-to-rise pattern as school resumes.

Dr. John Herman, a pediatric sleep specialist at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, said that this problem commonly causes dissension every year at this time. However, there are things that parents can do to make the transition easier.

The problem stems from vacation schedules that permit children to stay up late on summer evenings and "sleep in" in the morning. "And there's nothing wrong with that," said Herman. However, when school starts, it's time to change the schedule. Both parents and children need to get up earlier so there will be plenty of time to get the children to school on time.

"When children are allowed to set their own schedules, they tend to go to bed later and get up later," said Herman. The psychologist is a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry and director of the new Sleep Disorders Center for Children which opened July 14, at Children's Medical Center, UTHSCD's pediatric teaching hospital.

"It's as though the child is on 'California time' in a Central Time Zone; it's inconvenient, but it can be fixed," added Herman.

The psychologist said that children's sleep patterns are biphasic -- that is, they have one set of habits for the school year and one for weekends and summer vacation. The shock to the child's system may be compared to experiencing jet lag, a condition that occurs when traveling east or west to a new time zone. The jet-lag sufferer may feel dazed and draggy in the daytime and find that he or she is able to sleep only when it's nighttime back home. Hunger pains may hit at inappropriate times while the person may not be hungry at the time regular meals are served.

Another group of people who may have difficulty adjusting to changing sleeping-and-waking habits is shift workers, especially those individuals who change their shift frequently so their sleep rhythms can't stabilize. A sudden change to Daylight Savings Time is a shock to the system, and "the more extreme change from late-to-bed, late-to-rise to early-to-bed, early-to-rise may be worse, especially for children who are getting up three or four hours later," he commented.

Herman said that our ability to fall asleep and to continue sleeping an appropriate amount of time is related to the timing of certain biological patterns called circadian rhythms. These circadian rhythms include our patterns of sleeping and waking, periods of activity and rest, realizations of hunger and eating patterns, changes in body temperature and hormone-release patterns. If you stay up all night, the circadian rhythm proceeds in its normal pattern and can continue to do so for two weeks after a time-zone shift.

Since the normal circadian rhythm pattern is really closer to 25 hours than to 24, we must use such cues as mealtime, bedtime and getting-up time to help keep us on a 24-hour-a-day schedule. If we don't, our ability to sleep and be alert when we're awake may be adversely affected. Thus, it's helpful to adjust children's sleeping-and-waking schedule before school starts. Then they won't return to the classroom cranky and out-of-sorts or sleepy and inattentative.

(More)

Herman suggested that the way to change a child's bedtime is to alter his or her wake-up time. "Remember that children are nervous about going back to school -- especially the first day -- and while a few may 'zonk off' to sleep the night before, most will be staring at the ceiling for hours," he said.

Pressuring the child to go to sleep will only add to the child's anxiety and contribute toward keeping him or her awake longer. In addition, the overanxious parent who uses this kind of pressure chronically may instill the idea in the child that he or she has a sleep problem.

Herman said parents should not worry about the child's not getting enough sleep for a few nights after getting him or her up earlier. "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.

"To be realistic, expect a gradual adjustment. A little understanding of situational insomnia helps. Let the child watch TV or sit up and read for a while the night before school starts. And remember that the child doesn't like feeling sleepy, either."

Another way to handle getting into the new sleep schedule is to start the re-adjustment period about a week before school resumes following a vacation period. This way the change can be made at a slower pace with less disruption since the child will not have to be rushing around getting ready for school. Also, there may be less bedtime disruption than on a regular school day.

There are some things that parents can do that will help smooth the back-to-school-with-not-enough-sleep trauma.

"The more the child knows about what they're going to do the next day, the better," said the psychologist. "Many kids are very emotionally fragile in the morning and have trouble coping. Often they wake up in the worst mood of the day."

Herman pointed out that if it's a first-day-of-school situation or a new school, check it out beforehand. Try taking the child on a visit, and make sure he or she knows where to go the first day.

Try to prevent eruptions of temper by remembering what has caused previous problems in the morning and avoid these situations. The night before, parents can discuss such things as when the child will get up, what he or she will wear, what's for breakfast and what things the child will need to take to school the next day.

And try to make the transition pleasant.

"Let the kid enjoy bedtime; don't make going to bed a punishment. Let him or her read or play a while. Don't add to the pressure by saying, 'You know you have to get up in six hours.' A few days without the normal amount of sleep for the child usually won't hurt anything."

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NOTE: The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and the School of Allied Health Sciences.