

Independent Learning Newsletter Tips

How much sleep is enough?

We all know that sleep is important for general health, for growth and development and for emotional well-being. You may also know that important memory processes take place while you are sleeping, ensuring you retain what you are learning and studying.

Perhaps you have heard that teenagers need between nine to ten hours of sleep per night. But where does this come from and how valid is this claim? In 1980, Mary Carskadon of Stanford sequestered a group of adolescents in the university's sleep laboratory for several days, letting them sleep for as long as they wanted, up to 10 hours. She found that the teenagers slept just over nine hours, with very little variation. This single "naturalistic" study is the primary basis for the adolescent sleep recommendation. However some researchers argue that just because teenagers slept nine hours when left alone does not mean that this is the best thing for them, just like letting people eat whatever they want is not necessarily the best thing for their health. So there is no definitive answer at this point in time.

The amount of sleep needed by teenagers is most likely very individual, just like it is for adults. It is probably safe to assume that adolescents need more sleep than adults and that the average for most people is at least 8 hours of sleep per night. Pay attention to the signs and have students listen to their body. If they lie down in bed and fall asleep instantly, this is a sign they are not getting enough sleep for their body. It should take at least 15 minutes to fall asleep. If they wake up in the morning and are feeling exhausted, then check all lifestyle factors: are they getting enough sleep, eating healthily and getting enough exercise?

If teenagers are sleeping in for many hours on a weekend, unfortunately this does not mean they are "catching up" on their sleep. According to University of Texas Southwestern sleep specialist Dr. Gregory Carter, when we think we're catching up on sleep, what we're really doing is messing with our circadian cycle -- the body's internal clock which dictates sleep patterns. Excessive sleeping in is in fact a signal that during the week students need to go to bed earlier. The aim is to work out the optimum bed-time so that the need to catch up on large amounts of sleep on the weekend is eliminated.

There is nothing wrong with having a power-nap in the afternoon when students get home from school, as long as the nap is no longer than 40 minutes. A short nap can help students regain their energy levels and allow them to focus on the work they have to do that evening. However, a longer nap will also disrupt sleeping patterns for that night.

More on how to develop better sleeping patterns in the next newsletter item!

So learn more this year about how to improve your results and be more efficient and effective with your schoolwork by going to the links section in your portal and opening the ELES handbook:

