

Coaches' Corner: Is it Challenging Behavior or Lack of Sleep?



Sometimes what may seem like challenging behavior may really be the expression of an overtired child. Sleep has a powerful impact on child behavior – even as it does on adult behavior (we have just to consider how we feel after a poor night's sleep and how we move through the following day, particularly without a cup of coffee to boost our engines). Over-tired children have a more challenging time weathering life's "challenges" and "storms". They may engage in more tantrums, have more conflicts with teachers and peers, be more accident prone, get sick more often, and have difficulty settling into play. On the other hand, adequate sleep assists children in:

- Learning
- Improved impulse control
- Improved focus and attention
- Improved interactions and use of social skills
- Increased patience and resilience
- Increased health



Sleep is critical to learning. It is during sleep that the brain transfers information into long-term memory. Sleep is also a time when the mind can grapple with social-emotional challenges and process life events, as such sleep becomes a big component of children's social-emotional health and well-being (not just of their physical health). So how much is enough? According to the National Sleep Foundation:

- Infants need 14-18 hours of sleep per day
- Toddlers (18-36 months) need 13-14 hours of sleep per day, and
- Preschoolers and Kindergarteners need 11-12 hours of sleep per day

Of course there are individual differences, but in general many children are getting far less sleep per 24 hour period than is recommended. Naptime offers many children the opportunity to get the rest they need. It is important for us to remember that it can take 25-37 minutes for children to fall asleep. This means that we need to provide 45 minutes of quiet rest time in order to offer children the opportunity to fall asleep. At the same time, over-tired children will tend to fight sleep – leading to a vicious cycle of sleep deprivation and engagement in challenging behaviors. Even if children are no longer napping, access to a quiet rest time is very important to their well-being.

For more information regarding the importance of sleep and protecting sleep in your program, please refer to:

- *Sleepless in America* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (whose website also includes a brochure for talking to families about sleep: <http://www.parentchildhelp.com/PDF/brochure.pdf>)

And please remember to provide safe sleep environments for all children (particularly infants) in your care (*Safe Sleep* training available at <https://www.childcaretraining.org/?pageid=83>):

What does a safe sleep environment look like?

Reduce the Risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and Other Sleep-Related Causes of Infant Death



Use a firm sleep surface, such as a mattress in a safety-approved* crib, covered by a fitted sheet.

Do not use pillows, blankets, sheepskins, or crib bumpers anywhere in your baby's sleep area.

Keep soft objects, toys, and loose bedding out of your baby's sleep area.

Do not smoke or let anyone smoke around your baby.



Make sure nothing covers the baby's head.

Always place your baby on his or her back to sleep, for naps and at night.

Dress your baby in light sleep clothing, such as a one-piece sleeper, and do not use a blanket.

Baby should not sleep in an adult bed, on a couch, or on a chair alone, with you, or with anyone else.

*For more information on crib safety guidelines, contact the Consumer Product Safety Commission at 1-800-638-2772 or <http://www.cpsc.gov>.



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