

School is Starting: Kids Need Food and Sleep!

By

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With school starting, it is good for parents to remember that children need food and sleep to do their best in school. Studies have shown that proper nutrition and adequate rest are two of the most important predictors of academic success with children and teens.

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute children ages 7 to 11 need at least nine hours of sleep on a regular basis. This is a minimum. Inadequate sleep can impair their attention, learning, and performance of everyday activities (NHLBI e-Bulletin, September 9, 2005). This means if they must get up every morning at 6 a.m. in order to get to school by 7 a.m., they must be asleep by 9 p.m. To be asleep by 9 p.m., bedtime must be set earlier in order for them to actually be asleep by 9 p.m. Many bedtime rituals, such as baths and story times, must start around 8 p.m. and will take a concerted effort by parents to adhere to a consistent schedule. Once the children get used to it, however, it will become routine.

Teens also need adequate sleep. Their bodies are going through puberty and tremendous growth and must have sleep to stay healthy. Only 20% of teens polled by the National Sleep Foundation reported getting the recommended 7.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep at night. Getting adequate sleep has been linked to increased learning and concentration, improved behavior and mood, better sport performance, higher energy level and stable weight among the teen population. (Spring 2008 Living Well)

Not only is adequate sleep necessary for optimum school performance, but so is proper nutrition. Children need food for brain development and physical endurance throughout the busy school day. Sending children and teens to school with a healthy breakfast is a good way to help them get their day started right. If there is enough time for breakfast, a bowl of cereal with milk, or a piece of toast with peanut butter, or yogurt, or juice and fruit are all good choices. If time is short in the mornings and will not allow time for eating before leaving home, grab a banana or apple on the way out the door and eat it on the way to school, along with a granola bar, or a slice of cheese. Mixing a protein drink or a fruit smoothie to carry and drink on the way to school are also excellent ways to eat nutritionally on the run. Then, make sure your child eats a nutritional lunch, either the school lunch, or one that you prepare and send.

Be on the alert for signs of inadequate sleep and poor nutrition. Signs such as trouble waking up in the morning, irritability, random falling asleep and sleeping for an extra long period may signal some intervention is needed to get your child back on the right track to getting proper nutrition and adequate rest. As a parent, it is your responsibility to see that your child achieves his potential academically and the best way is to monitor these two areas— nutrition and sleep. Be a good role model yourself and practice what you preach. Remember, your children watch what you do as much or more than what you say. Eat breakfast or grab a nutritious snack on your way out the door. Turn off the television and go to bed and make sure you are getting adequate rest yourself. Your child will be more likely to listen to your advice when you follow the same guidelines.

Vacation time is over and families are establishing new schedules and routines, so make sure yours will include healthy eating and adequate rest for your school-aged children and yourself over the coming year. You will be glad you did!