A Good Night for All Children: The Impact of the Pajama Program on Children’s Sleep Health and Wellness

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SLEEP IS THE FORGOTTEN COUNTRY AND IS NOT GETTING THE ATTENTION IT MERITS. IT PLAYS OUT IN THE HOME, IN THE PEDIATRICIAN’S OFFICE, AND IN SCHOOL. SLEEP IS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN.

—MARY A. CARSKADON, PHD

Sleep, along with diet and exercise, is at the very foundation of health and well-being. It is a fundamental and critical biological need—not an optional endeavor to be taken lightly. Quite simply, sleeping is one of the most important functions in life, and it must be prioritized as such.

In recent years, the importance of sleep in a child’s growth and development has been confirmed by researchers. In addition to the fact that children generally need more sleep than adults, we are learning that ensuring sleep in childhood can have lifetime benefits. Although the critical importance and the need for sleep in children may seem obvious, many of our children fail to get the sleep they need for optimal physical and psychological development and functioning, especially those affected by poverty and living in transition or crisis. Between 10 and 45 percent of otherwise healthy children are estimated to have sleep problems; in economically disadvantage populations, this percentage may be as high as 94 percent. Among children with developmental disorders, including autism, the prevalence of sleep problems ranges from 40 to 80 percent.

Approximately 15 million American children are affected by inadequate sleep.

Insufficient sleep disrupts every physiologic function in the human body.

Sleep and emotional functioning are closely linked.

Sleep related problems affect approximately 25-40% of children and adolescents.

Children without regular bedtime schedule have more behavioral difficulties.

Sleep is a key factor in how young children respond to their world.
During the early years of life, the rate of learning is more rapid than at any time in the life cycle. Researchers theorize that sleep may be critical for keeping nerve cells functioning optimally to accommodate this crucial time of rapid development. In fact, attention, motivation, emotions, stress responses, outlook, school performance, behavior, memory, relationships, mood, and even propensity for substance abuse are but a few aspects of our lives affected by sleep.

From a physical perspective, sleep is involved in cellular repair, the release of growth hormone, immunity, strengthening of the nervous system, metabolism, and weight management—all while playing a vital role in crucial brain development.

Many children, however, are not getting the sleep their bodies and minds require. Suboptimal sleeping conditions, stress, early school start times, poor sleep habits, lack of a sleep schedule, electronics and an overall lack of education about the importance of sleep contribute to this critical and widespread problem. Research has demonstrated a distinct vulnerability to the effects of poor sleep quality on all children, especially those in distress and facing challenges such as poverty, homelessness, and foster care, among others.

The Pajama Program can be seen as an evidenced-based, targeted intervention for helping children in distress to achieve the quality sleep they need with the comfort and security they deserve. The simple and inexpensive gesture of providing pajamas and books to a child in need is the first step in a profound journey toward making a real, measurable, and extreme impact on the quality of a child’s life.

Sleep Quality
Children’s sleep health has become a new priority in prevention and intervention, as sleep deprivation is associated with numerous adverse behavioral, cognitive, and health outcomes. For optimum functioning, children require sufficient, quality sleep.

It is a given that insufficient sleep disrupts not only a child’s night but a child’s day as well. A child is less mentally alert, more inattentive, impulsive, argumentative, hyperactive, and prone to accidents and injury following a poor night’s sleep. Memory consolidation, mood regulation, attention, school performance, and the capacity to learn are all diminished when sleep is compromised. Additionally, poor quality sleep negatively impacts the immune system, which makes a child more susceptible to illness, chronic and acute health problems.
Sleep Problems in Childhood May Negatively Impact Adulthood

Why is it crucial to support and protect a child’s access to adequate and comfortable sleep? A key reason is that if children lack appropriate sleep, every aspect of their growth and development may be negatively impacted. Recent research has demonstrated that poor sleep patterns early in life can cause a host of problems later in life.

Perhaps most alarming is the suggestion that sleeplessness and lack of quality sleep in early childhood could impair cognitive performance well into adulthood. Without enough sleep, particularly in childhood, the way our brain functions may be fundamentally changed for the remainder of life.

Insufficient sleep is not just a concern for younger children; adolescents are developmentally vulnerable to insufficient or poor quality sleep as well. Sleep insufficiency in adolescents is associated with poor school performance, risk-taking behaviors, diabetes, mood swings, motor vehicle accidents, obesity, substance abuse, depression, and even suicide. Chronically sleep-deprived youth are drawn to stimulants like coffee, energy drinks and drugs of abuse such as amphetamines, and when they subsequently have difficulty falling asleep at night, they may be drawn to drugs to help them sleep.

Sleep in Distressed Children

Children’s sleep health must be prioritized to give all children the advantages provided by optimal sleep. The fact is that not all sleep is equal, and as a result, the benefits of quality sleep are not equally enjoyed by all children. Children in distress can be at an especially great disadvantage when it comes to realizing the physical and psychological benefits of adequate sleep.

Unfortunately, this poor sleep quality leads to learning, emotional, and behavioral problems— influencing health, achievement, performance, and overall quality of life in both the short and long term. A bidirectional relationship between sleep and poverty is evident: poor sleep can lead to lower socioeconomic status by means of learning difficulties and compromised performance as well as psychological and physical problems, while a lower socioeconomic status can lead to poor sleep.

Scientific support exists for improving children’s sleep health, as doing so will have a lasting, positive impact on individuals and society as a whole. Targeted interventions, such as those provided by the Pajama
Program, can help to narrow the gap for children in crisis and effectively mediate the significant personal and societal consequences of poor sleep quality.

It is evident from the research that a failure to prioritize the sleep needs of children—especially children in distress—to ensure adequate, healthful sleep places vulnerable children at further risk and disadvantage for problems. Children in poverty and distress suffer from many disadvantages, and considerable evidence suggests that poor sleep is one major, preventable cause.

A Bedtime Routine for All Children

Quality sleep must be fostered by a calming, comforting, positive, and predictable transition from wake to sleep. When this is achieved, usually in a series of steps, it is referred to as a pre-sleep or bedtime routine. It is well known that children of all ages thrive on predictable and structured routines that help them feel safe and secure. A regular schedule provides children with a sense of order and organization, while following a consistent bedtime routine aids in the development of healthy sleep habits that result in quality sleep.

Far more crucial than its name implies, a bedtime routine serves a critical function in the achievement of healthy sleep. Having consistent bedtime preparation activities that occur in the same order and at roughly the same time every night encourage the activities associated with winding down, going to bed, and falling asleep. The routine itself, defined by its repetitiveness, predictability, and pleasantry, induces relaxation and promotes sleep onset. Once learned, this habit or routine will provide structure and security in the often chaotic and unstructured environment of a child in distress.

This pre-sleep routine is comprised of several consistent steps, always performed in the same order, so it can be easily duplicated in any environment. Familiar patterns and rituals provide children with the security of knowing what to expect, as well as helping them to foster a personal sense of responsibility. The bedtime routine or sleep ritual can be fairly short, lasting 20–40 minutes, and serves as a signal to the child that it is bedtime. A good sleep ritual also serves to help the child fall asleep on his or her own.

The routine may consist of any number or combination of steps, but all should lead the child closer to the bed and sleep. The steps might consist of a snack, bath, teeth brushing, putting on pajamas, reading a
Consistency and predictability of the routine are vitally important for ensuring quality sleep. Regular bedtimes and quiet pre-sleep routines are associated with improved success in going to bed, falling asleep, sleeping through the night, and waking in the morning.

**Pajamas Represent Comfort**

THE CLOTHING A CHILD SPENDS 8–10 HOURS SLEEPING IN IS IMPORTANT TO A CHILD’S WELL-BEING. NEW PAJAMAS ARE A NECESSARY PART OF PROMOTING GOOD HEALTH AND PREVENTING INFECTIONS AND DISEASE, AS WELL AS PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS.

—SHELDON H. CHERRY, MD, CLINICAL PROFESSOR OF OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY, MT. SINAI SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, NYC

Pajamas are a key component of even the most basic bedtime routine. Children’s pajamas are often in child-pleasing colors, textures, and patterns, and are typically designed for sleep comfort and safety. For many Americans, changing into pajamas before going to sleep is probably the most symbolic part of the bedtime routine, representing security and comfort, which, ultimately, positively impacts bedtime and the ability to sleep.

Unfortunately, pajamas are not an available part of the bedtime routine for all children, especially for those in crisis or transition. Through the provision of pajamas, the Pajama Program helps to ensure improved sleep and the numerous benefits that accompany it. Inarguably, well rested children are healthier, happier, and potentially smarter as a result of getting adequate sleep.

**Bedtime Is Book Time**

The enjoyment and pleasure of a bedtime story before sleep is indisputable. Bedtime reading is associated with emotional warmth, a sense of well-being, and sleep readiness—but for children in crisis, living in shelters or group homes, books—like pajamas—are frequently an inaccessible luxury. Books stimulate a child’s development and well-being in many ways. In addition to improving reading ability, a book at bedtime promotes a host of benefits that include language development, increased motor skills, decreased stress levels, improved memory skills as well as enhanced emotional and social development.

Reduced total sleep time in children predicted more delinquent behavior and more concentration problems.

Sleep problems at ages 3–8 predicted onset of alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use among boys and onset of alcohol use among girls.

The improvement of sleep could potentially alleviate many health problems among the homeless.

Even minor sleep restriction impacts children's neurocognitive functioning.

Children from disadvantaged households are less likely to have consistent bedtime routines than more advantaged children.

There is a bidirectional relationship between sleep and mental health.

Children in poverty often live in conditions unsuitable for attaining optimal sleep.
The pleasant content of a book at bedtime helps set the stage for the reverie of a child’s mind as he or she drifts off to sleep. If only at bedtime, this positive aspect of the pre-sleep routine allows children to escape the concerns of their day.

A Good Night for All Children

THE PAJAMA PROGRAM CREATES A FOUNDATION ON WHICH TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE, EDUCATE, AND FACILITATE SLEEP HEALTH AND WELLNESS FOR ALL CHILDREN.

Many children have not experienced the security and comfort of having a parent tuck them into bed at night. Many children have never enjoyed the simple comfort of warm, clean pajamas and a bedtime story. Some of the children served by the Pajama Program have been abused or neglected; some are living with their families below the poverty level and are in desperate need of food, clothing, and shelter.

National educational initiatives in sleep health and wellness aimed at children, parents, educators, and community leaders are essential if we are to make real progress in ensuring a better life for all children. As individuals and as a society, it is imperative that we make children’s sleep health a priority and are vigilant about providing the best sleep possible for our children to ensure their health, safety, education, well-being and quality of life—for their future depends on it. No child’s health—or potential—is expendable; and we must make the attainment of quality sleep equally accessible to every child. The bottom line is simple: all children deserve the health and restorative benefits of a good night’s sleep, starting with pajamas and a good book. We all deserve a dream.

References:


