

Poor children more vulnerable to effects of poor sleep

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Elementary-school-age children from poor families are more vulnerable to the effects of poor sleep than their peers. That's the finding of a new study that assessed the ties between children's sleep and their emotional development.

The study, by researchers at Auburn University, appears in the May/June 2010 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers looked at how [sleep](#) disruptions—namely, the amount, quality, and schedule of sleep—affect children's adjustment. They examined more than 140 [children](#) in third to fifth grades, of whom three-quarters were White and almost a quarter were African American. Families varied widely in terms of annual income and parents' education and jobs.

The study gathered information from parents' and children's reports, as well as motion sensors worn by the children at night to examine their sleep. The researchers looked at relations between sleep and emotional development when children were in third and fifth grades; they also compared how children's sleep when they were in third grade was related to their well-being when they were in fifth grade.

Findings indicate that children from poorer families had higher levels of externalizing symptoms (such as aggression and delinquency) and internalizing symptoms (such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem) when they slept poorly. Conversely, when these children slept

better, their levels of symptoms were similar to those of other children from nonpoor families.

A similar pattern held for African-American children. Lack of sleep may combine with other stressors in the lives of low-income and [minority children](#) to contribute to the higher levels of [behavior problems](#). However, for minority children, getting a good sleep protects against a wide range of adjustment problems, the authors suggest.

This research adds to the mounting evidence linking sleep to day-to-day functioning in childhood, and highlights the role of sleep in a wide range of behavioral problems in high-risk children.

"The significance of children's sleep to their development is receiving increased attention," according to Mona El-Sheikh, Alumni Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University and the study's lead author.

"Our findings can inform intervention programs as well as parent education programs. Programs that are tailored to families' resources and challenges are likely to be more effective."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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