

Less sleep may be answer to beating bedtime blues

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(Medical Xpress) -- Restricting the amount of time a child spends in bed could lower levels of sleep-related stress and anxiety, a Flinders University researcher believes.

Dr. Michael Gradisar, a senior lecturer in clinical child psychology, is about to begin a new study to determine whether childhood insomnia and separation [anxiety](#) can be treated by controlling the time a child spends in bed, and the amount of sleep they have.

Behavioral [sleep problems](#), including [bedtime](#) refusal or [resistance](#),

delayed sleep onset and prolonged night awakenings, affect one in every two children at some stage of their lives, and are usually induced by the [fear](#) of a threat to themselves or their families, such as a break-in.

Dr. Gradisar said his past research had shown sleep-anxious children experienced a better quality of sleep and less night-time worry if they went to bed later.

“In a study last year we asked parents to put their child to bed at the time they actually fall asleep, so if their usual bedtime is 7pm but they lay awake worrying for two hours we asked them to put them down at 9pm,” Dr. Gradisar said.

“Not only did the children experience better quality of sleep, at the end of the two week study there was a significant reduction in their anxiety, particularly [separation anxiety](#), which meant they could fall asleep without their parents nearby.”

In the next phase of his project, funded through a \$10,000 Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences grant, Dr. Gradisar will explore the benefits of “sleep restriction therapy”.

Parents will keep a sleep diary recording their child’s sleep patterns before, during and after treatment, totalling 21 days of data, to determine whether the restriction of sleep, or the restriction of time in bed, or a combination of the two, leads to reduced levels of anxiety.

“If the child falls asleep at 9pm we’ll be asking the parents to put them to bed at 9.30pm,” he said.

“Our first study showed that if you reduce the amount of time they spend in bed the anxiety gets better, and we were hypothesising that sleep restriction was the driver for that, so now we’re trying to see what

happens when you induce sleepiness.

“The idea is that by delaying sleep you make them sleepier and therefore reduce the anxiety associated with going to bed.”

Dr. Gradisar said he hoped the technique could also be used alongside traditional cognitive behavioral therapies for childhood anxiety disorders.

“We’ll have to find a balance as to how much sleepiness will impact their schoolwork and other activities versus the benefit to reduced anxiety,” he said.

“We’ve always focused on trying to improve sleep quality and the by-product has been reduced anxiety but the main goal for parents is that their children can [sleep](#) by themselves, so the idea of the study is to see what techniques lead to that goal.”

Provided by Flinders University

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