

Sleep researchers study value of preschool naps

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A new investigation of the value of naps for young children conducted by researchers at UMass Amherst will take sleep study techniques out of the bedroom and into preschool classrooms across western Massachusetts. Credit: UMass Amherst

Parents may feel it's clear that missing a nap means their young children will be grumpy and out-of-sorts, but scientists who study sleep say almost nothing is known about how daytime sleep affects children's coping skills and learning.

Now neuroscientist Rebecca Spencer at the University of Massachusetts Amherst has received a five-year, \$2 million grant from NIH's Heart, Lung and Blood Institute to significantly advance knowledge about how napping and sleep affect memory, behavior and emotions in

preschoolers.

Spencer says with pressure mounting in some school districts to eliminate naps, "we feel it's important to study this and know their value more precisely. There's a sense among some educators that kids have to 'get over' napping in preparation for kindergarten, but it could be misguided. There's some evidence in [young adults](#) and in older children that naps are beneficial. So I suspect there is a benefit for younger children too. We need to know whether keeping naps in the school day is important."

Attending preschool offers life-long benefits in [physical health](#), [emotional stability](#) and quality of life, Spencer points out, and in the United States, 70 percent of four- and five-year-olds attend. There is a trend now toward incorporating new curricula in preschool such as anti-bullying messages and lessons on how to brush your teeth. If sleep protects and enhances physical and emotional learning in young children as it does in older kids, taking away naptime could undercut such efforts, she adds.

"Right now, there's nothing to support teachers who feel that naps can really help [young children](#), there's no concrete science behind that," the neuroscientist says. "But if sleep is going to enhance all these benefits of attending preschool, we need to know it."

Over the next five years, Spencer and her graduate students hope to study about 480 preschoolers between 3 and 5 years old, boys and girls in [diverse communities](#) across western Massachusetts. The research will include fact-based and emotional memory studies with and without napping, measures of physical activity levels and parent reports of their children's' nighttime sleep, to find out how classroom experience interacts with sleep and physical activity and whether daytime sleep enhances learning. The research will also explore the relationship

between sleep and behavior disorders.

"I think we'll have a rich data set for examining sleep, [physical activity](#) and the child's behavior," says Spencer. "We think that the nap benefit is going to be especially useful for kids who don't get optimal overnight [sleep](#). Culture plays a role in how late you stay up, and some kids live in noisy inner city neighborhoods. If we can help them with a nap, we want to know that."

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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