

Social ties more important than biology when it comes to teen sleep problems

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Medical researchers point to developmental factors, specifically the decline of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, as an explanation for why children get less sleep as they become teenagers. But a new study suggests that social ties, including relationships with peers and parents, may be even more responsible for changing sleep patterns among adolescents.

"My study found that [social ties](#) were more important than biological development as predictors of teen sleep behaviors," said David J. Maume, a sociology professor at the University of Cincinnati, and author of the study, "Social Ties and Adolescent Sleep Disruption," which appears in the December issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

Drawing on a sample from the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, a longitudinal study of children's physical, cognitive, and social development, Maume analyzed the changes in school night [sleep patterns](#) of nearly 1,000 adolescents from when they were 12 to 15-years-old. He found that during this period, the average sleep duration dropped from more than nine hours per school night to less than eight.

"When adolescents have trouble sleeping, doctors often recommend prescription drugs to address the problem," Maume said. "My research indicates that it's necessary to look beyond biology when seeking to understand and treat adolescents' [sleep problems](#). Such an approach may lead to more counseling or greater parental involvement in teens' lives,

both of which are less invasive than commonly-prescribed medical solutions and, at least in the case of parental involvement, cheaper."

Maume found that parental monitoring of adolescent behavior—especially in setting a bedtime—strongly determined healthy sleep habits. "Research shows that parents who keep tabs on their kids are less likely to see them get into trouble or use drugs and alcohol," Maume said. "My findings suggest a similar dynamic with sleep. Parents who monitor their children's behavior are more likely to have kids that get adequate rest. Given that children generally get less sleep as they become teenagers, parents should be ever more vigilant at this stage."

Adolescents also had healthier sleep—longer duration and higher quality—when they felt they were a part of the schools they attended or had friends who cared about academics and were positive, social people. "Teens who have pro-social friends, tend to behave in pro-social ways, which includes taking care of one's health by getting proper sleep," Maume said.

The study also uncovered a number of other interesting findings. For example, minority adolescents reported less sleep on school nights than their white counterparts. "Past research on minority families suggests that children who have trouble sleeping are allowed to get up, whereas white youths are encouraged to stay in bed," Maume said. "If this is the case, then minority children may get less sleep at night."

In addition, Maume discovered that girls reported more sleep issues (e.g., waking up in the middle of the night and not being able to fall back to sleep; worrying about homework, friends, or family and not being able to fall asleep as a result; having trouble falling asleep in general; and having trouble waking up) than boys. "Some research has suggested that women report more sickness than men—even though men typically die younger than women—because women are socialized to be introspective

and to recognize illness," Maume said. "This may apply to sleep problems as well."

Maume also found that as [adolescents](#) increased their time in front of the television from ages 12 to 15, they slept marginally longer but had slightly more sleep issues. On the other hand, increases in adolescent computer usage were associated with both less sleep and more sleep issues.

"My findings related to computer usage were what I expected," Maume said. "However, I did not anticipate that watching more television would correlate with getting more sleep. It's possible that television watching may be associated with longer sleep if most of the viewing is taking place on the weekends when these kids can [sleep](#) late rather than go to school in the morning. Unfortunately, my data do not allow for an examination of this speculation."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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