

Parent and child must get enough sleep to protect against child obesity

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Credit: xiaphias/Wikipedia

Is sleep one of your most important family values? A new University of Illinois study suggests that it should be, reporting that more parental sleep is related to more child sleep, which is related to decreased child obesity.

"Parents should make being well rested a family value and a priority.

Sleep routines in a family affect all the members of the household, not just [children](#); we know that [parents](#) won't get a good night's sleep unless and until their preschool children are sleeping," said Barbara H. Fiese, director of the U of I's Family Resiliency Center and Pampered Chef Endowed Chair.

And the effects of sleeplessness go beyond just being tired the next day. Studies show that moms, dads, and their children are likely to gain weight as they lose sleep, she said.

Fiese suggests limiting your children's exposure to TV and other electronic devices to two hours a day and turning them off a half-hour before bedtime (needless to say, children should not have televisions in their bedrooms); spending some time in a calming, predictable routine, such as giving the child a bath or reading together; and making sure preschoolers are in bed in time to get the recommended 10 hours of sleep a night.

Then adults should follow a calming routine themselves. "We're learning more and more about how important it is to unplug for a half-hour or so before we go to bed. At a certain time, turn off your electronic devices—even e-books—and engage in whatever soothing ritual helps you to relax enough to sleep," she said.

Although the mechanism hasn't yet been identified, Fiese said that restorative sleep is thought to help regulate our metabolism. Her recent study showed that sleep is a protective factor in lowering the incidence of obesity in parents and being overweight in preschool children.

In the study, socioeconomic characteristics were assessed in relation to protective routines and prevalence of being obese or overweight for 337 [preschool children](#) and their parents. The routines assessed in parents included adequate sleep (over seven hours) and family mealtime routine.

The four protective routines assessed in children were adequate sleep (10 or more hours per night), family mealtime routine, limiting screen-viewing time to less than two hours a day, and not having a bedroom TV.

The only significant individual protective factor against obesity or overweight in children was getting [adequate sleep](#). Children who did not get enough sleep had a greater risk for being overweight than children who engaged in at least three of the protective routines regularly, even after controlling for parents' BMI and socio-demographic characteristics, Fiese said.

But the researchers also learned that the number of hours a parent sleeps is related to how much sleep children are getting, so that a parent's sleep has an effect on the likelihood that their children will be overweight or obese.

"We viewed how long parents slept and how long children slept as part of a household routine and found that they really did go together," she said.

In an earlier study, Fiese followed families for a year and was surprised when parents reported that their five- to seven-year-old children were going to bed as late as 11 p.m. When she looked deeper into the reason for these late bedtimes, she found that parents who worked late into the evening viewed those late-night hours with their children as a special time.

"They described cuddling on the couch, watching television, and the child falling asleep in his parent's arms at 10 or 11 p.m. and being carried to bed. You can understand how it happens, but that's too late for a child who has to get up and go to school the next day," she noted.

She noted that inadequate sleep is not just a problem for preschoolers

but for elementary school children and high school students whose brains are still developing. Adults don't function well on inadequate sleep either, she noted.

Fiese sees obesity intervention as a three-legged stool in which every member of the family is able to eat well, play well, and sleep well.

"Paying attention to those three pillars of health—good nutrition, enough exercise, and adequate [sleep](#)—benefits everyone in the family," she said.

"Parent routines, child routines, and [family](#) demographics associated with obesity in parents and preschool-aged children" was published in the April 2014 issue of *Frontiers in Psychology*. Blake L. Jones of Purdue University and Barbara H. Fiese and the STRONG Kids Team of the University of Illinois co-authored the article. The Illinois Council for Agriculture Research, the U of I Health and Wellness Initiative, and USDA funded the study.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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