

# Sleep education program spurs preschoolers to snooze 30 minutes longer at night

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Credit: xiaphias/Wikipedia

Taking part in an educational sleep program resulted in a 30-minute average increase in sleep duration at a one-month follow-up for preschoolers, according to a new study from the University of Michigan.

In the study, published in the journal *Sleep*, families in two Head Start programs participated in the Sweet Dreamzzz Early Childhood Sleep

Education Program. The Detroit-area nonprofit organization, Sweet Dreamzzz, Inc. developed the program and offers it for free when funding allows. Head Start programs aim to give preschool opportunities to low-income families, in part to improve readiness for elementary school.

Researchers found that among 152 preschool children and their families, the sleep education program produced a 30-minute increase in [sleep duration](#) among the kids, says lead author Katherine (Wilson) DeRue, M.D., M.S., who conducted the study while a postgraduate fellow at the University of Michigan Sleep Disorders Center and Departments of Neurology and Pediatrics.

"We know that an increase in sleep duration of that magnitude is associated with better function for kids during the day" says DeRue, who is now a pediatrician and sleep physician at IHA Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Consultants in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"Parents often underestimate how much sleep their kids require, so an educational program like this, directed at parents when they have more control over their kids' sleep schedules, can have great impact."

The study also found that parents' awareness and knowledge of good sleep behaviors also improved after program participation, but this effect was not sustained when parents were retested one month later.

The educational program included a one-time, 45-minute sleep education program for parents, and two weeks of classroom sleep education for the preschoolers. Parents were asked to keep diaries for assessment of their children's sleep habits.

"So we found that a two-week program of daily exposure to sleep education in the preschool classroom, along with an initial presentation

for parents, can be an effective strategy," says Ronald D. Chervin, M.D., M.S., the study's senior author, director of the U-M Sleep Disorders Center, and a volunteer on Sweet Dreamzzz's Advisory Board.

"But repeated exposure or reminders about the sleep information may be necessary to maintain the effects for kids and especially parents over time."

This is believed to be the first study to examine the effect of a sleep education program on the sleep of preschool age children.

The Head Start programs were located in greater Lansing, Mich. and Detroit, Mich.

The lessons taught in school seemed to stick with the children. Among the lessons were recognizing 8 p.m. as the desirable bedtime; learning that an apple is a better snack before bedtime than a candy bar; and identifying reading rather than watching TV as a relaxing activity before bedtime.

"We are pleased to see that the University of Michigan researchers have been able to measure the impact of our sleep program. We know a proper sleep environment, regular bedtime routine, and the right amount of sleep hours each night can impact the future of our children," says Nancy Maxwell, executive director of the non-profit Sweet Dreamzzz, Inc.

Sweet Dreamzzz provides educational programs on sleep, along with free sleep essentials— such as sleeping bags, toothbrushes, and books about sleep—to schoolchildren in low-income areas. Sweet Dreamzzz's main aims are to encourage better sleep – and thereby better health and learning—at the earliest ages.

Most evidence indicates that children commonly obtain insufficient sleep, says DeRue, and this study provides a critical demonstration that minimal, relatively inexpensive interventions can make a difference.

"Family sleep education during early childhood years, when the [sleep habits](#) are being established, could prove to be a cost-effective but impactful strategy to improve children's overall health," says DeRue.

"Nutrition and exercise are commonly the focus of educational efforts to improve children's health," adds Chervin. "Good sleep – in quality and quantity—is no less vital to our kids' future, yet it's rarely if ever discussed. Our new findings suggest that a small amount of effort to promote better [sleep](#) could have substantial benefit now, and conceivably for years to come as these youngsters grow older."

**More information:** Paper: [dx.doi.org/10.5665/sleep.3774](https://doi.org/10.5665/sleep.3774)

To learn more about Sweet Dreamzzz, visit [www.sweetdreamzzz.org](http://www.sweetdreamzzz.org)

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