

# Hard to find good help for child sleep issues

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A new study by researchers at The University of Western Australia and Flinders University has found a serious lack of expertise in health professionals when it comes to treating sleep problems in children.

The research, published in *Sleep Medicine* anonymously surveyed 263 Australian [health professionals](#) and revealed a significant shortfall in the knowledge, understanding and skills to identify manage and prevent pediatric sleep disorders.

Sleep disorders are common in Australian children, with studies indicating up to 30 percent of children may experience sleep problems ranging from unsettled newborn babies to restless teenagers. World Sleep Day this Friday 19 March will highlight the importance of regular sleep for a [health](#) future.

Lead author Dr. Cele Richardson, from UWA's Centre for Sleep Science, said health professionals received very little training in [sleep medicine](#) during their degree and it was likely this lack of training adversely affected their clinical practice.

"We found about one-third of the health professionals were not routinely screening for [sleep disorders](#) in pediatric patients and many were not routinely recommending evidence based treatments," Dr. Richardson said.

"One common reason for not screening for sleep problems was the belief that parents would report poor sleep if it were a problem.

"Yet other research has shown that both parents and adolescents may under-recognise sleep problems."

The impact of disrupted sleep on young people includes impaired [physical health](#), psychosocial wellbeing and academic achievement, and increased risk taking such as substance use; all of which may have lasting impacts into adulthood.

In the study, health professional answered less than half of pediatric sleep knowledge questions correctly on average, and around 60 percent said that they were not trained in sleep measurement such as sleep diaries and questionnaires, or in how to take a sleep history.

Health professionals surveyed included doctors, nurses, psychologists,

social workers, occupational therapists, pharmacists, dentists and sleep coaches.

Senior author Professor Michael Gradisar, director of the Child and Adolescent Sleep Clinic at Flinders University, said while the focus of the study was on health professionals, it showed that the public needed to be more aware about the quality training in sleep that their health professionals had received.

"It can mean the difference between 'getting worse' and 'changing your life,'" Professor Gradisar said.

Dr. Richardson, who conducted her Ph.D. at Flinders University, and Professor Gradisar recommended families access resources at the Sleep Health Foundation to improve their own knowledge of pediatric sleep.

"The impact and importance of pediatric sleep was well recognized by health professionals, but sleep is often considered less important than a healthy diet and exercise, which is problematic," Dr. Richardson said

The new study is calling for reforms to clinical sleep medicine training for health professionals and efforts to increase understanding of the importance of sleep in the wider community.

This would require a coordinated approach between professional bodies, and the health practitioners they represent, higher education providers and the government.

"Starting from infancy, the role of sleep is extremely important in the development of children's emotional, behavioral and cognitive functioning," Professor Gradisar said. "Therefore, to ensure [young people](#) reach their potential, we need to make sure [sleep problems](#) are identified and treated early."

**More information:** Cele Richardson et al. Perfectionism and insomnia in adolescents: The role of vulnerability to stress and gender, *Journal of Adolescence* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.10.003)

Provided by Flinders University

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