

Good sleep is key to pre-teen mental health, confirms study

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For many kids, the period between childhood and early adolescence can be difficult.

This transitional period is commonly known as "pre-adolescence" and can be a vulnerable time for the development of [mental health](#) problems, like anxiety and depression.

So many of our young adolescents need support to navigate this time as they develop. Improving a young person's sleep behavior could be one tool to do this.

Adequate, good-quality sleep is crucial for mental health and well-being for everyone—from infancy to old age. On the other hand, experiencing sleep problems, like insomnia, recurrent nightmares and breathing problems during sleep are associated with poorer mental health.

In our study, published recently in *JAMA Psychiatry*, we wanted to understand the role of a range of sleep problems on the emotional and behavioral well-being of pre-adolescents.

We analyzed data from a [longitudinal study](#) of more than 10,000 children and their parents or caregivers, which assessed children aged 9 to 11 and again two years later when they were 11 to 13.

Parents and caregivers were asked about their child's typical sleep patterns, sleep problems and any changes to sleeping, as well as any emotional and behavioral problems they were experiencing.

At pre-adolescence, individuals were categorized into sleep groups based on the type and severity of sleep problems they experienced.

For example, one in four pre-adolescents experienced very low levels of sleep disturbance, while the majority (about two in five pre-adolescents, or 42%) experienced moderate levels of a range of problems.

A minority experienced difficulties specifically in falling asleep and

staying asleep throughout the night (about one in seven, or 16%), or high levels of problems in general (17%).

These groups differ in the levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties they experience—those with more severe sleep problems reported greater emotional and behavioral difficulties.

These problems range from withdrawal and anxiety to instances of aggression and rule-breaking.

When the adolescents were assessed two years later, there was a marked shift in the prevalence of sleep problems experienced by adolescents overall.

The number of young teenagers having difficulties specifically falling and staying asleep now made up one-third of the sample and one-third experienced low levels of problems.

In contrast, one in five experienced moderate levels of "mixed" problems (down from 42%).

For most young adolescents, their sleep patterns did not change during this transition period. However, a minority of adolescents showed improvements or deterioration in their sleep.

Notably, when adolescents experienced an increase in their sleep problems, they also experienced increases in both emotional and behavioral problems.

This effect was much stronger for [emotional problems](#) (like feelings of anxiety or a depressed mood), highlighting the importance of getting a good night's sleep for adolescents' emotional well-being.

When adolescents' sleep problems improved, so too did their mental health.

Our findings indicate that treating sleep problems could be an effective way to improve mental health symptoms in [young teens](#), and highlights the importance of good sleep for their mental well-being and may have long-lasting benefits throughout adolescence and beyond.

Studies from infants through to the elderly show the benefits of healthy sleep for mental and emotional well-being, and can help provide protection against a range of mental disorders.

Other research indicates that good sleep supports [physical health](#), [school performance](#), and cognition, and can reduce risky behaviors like dangerous substance use and driving under the influence.

Good sleep can also be modeled—research shows that in families where parents sleep well, teens are also more likely to get a good night's sleep.

As a parent or caregiver, there are practical ways to support young adolescent sleep patterns:

1. Regular physical activity and exposure to daylight can help regulate young adolescents' circadian rhythms.
2. Encourage your teen to avoid caffeine in the afternoons and evenings. This can delay their bedtime and make it more difficult to get up in the mornings.
3. Encourage your [adolescent](#) to wind down with a quiet activity prior to bed. Try to remove screens from the bedroom and minimize screen-based activities in the evening.
4. Encourage a regular sleep schedule, falling asleep and getting up at the same time each day.
5. Seek medical advice for any [sleep problems](#).

Our study suggests that ensuring and supporting good sleeping habits in pre-teens will continue to benefit their mental health and well-being as they grow into teenagers and young adults.

So, saying "no" to that extra 15 minutes on their phones or "just five more minutes" of TV is worth doing in order to ensure your young people get a good night's sleep.

More information: Rebecca Cooper et al, Associations of Changes in Sleep and Emotional and Behavioral Problems From Late Childhood to Early Adolescence, *JAMA Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2023.0379](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2023.0379)

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