

Good eating and sleep habits help kids succeed in school

August 5 2013, by Nicole Wyatt



Adults often hear what they should be doing to improve their health. But many of these known wellness behaviors are important for kids, too, and two University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) experts say school success depends on making the right choices.

Health habits, such as eating and sleep patterns, are linked to academic success, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Your brain can't work if you're not consuming enough calories, and in general that's not a problem," explained Krista Casazza, Ph.D., R.D.,

assistant professor in the Department of Nutrition Sciences. "But when [kids](#) go to school without eating breakfast, their cognitive function can be affected."

Casazza suggests kids start the day with fruits, proteins and whole grains. Avoid sugary cereals because they cause a sugar high, then a crash.

"A balanced breakfast will fuel the body for a long period and help sustain their attention level through lunch, when they need to eat well again," Casazza said. "This will hold them until dinner, and they won't snack ravenously after school."

If the kids do need to eat something prior to dinner, consider these options:

- Offer healthy choices like yogurt, fruits and veggies.
- If they want "kid stuff," baked chips can be an option, in moderation.
- Drink water. Soda lacks nutritional value.

Once homework and dinner are done, sleep needs to be the priority.

"Children need a good night's sleep for their overall school performance," said Kristin Avis, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Pediatrics Division of Pulmonary and Sleep Medicine.

"Lack of sleep can lead to problems with attention and memory in the classroom, affect impulse control and mood regulation lead to anxiety and even depression," Avis said.

Avis said kids ages 6-12 should get nine hours sleep nightly as should adolescents ages 13-18—but typically they average little more than seven hours per night.

"Often parents think one night of sleep loss won't matter, but that's all it takes to affect them the next day," Avis explained. "If they are chronically deprived, it can snowball and make matters worse."

Catching up on lost sleep on the weekend can make matters worse.

"If kids sleep in Saturday, they have a hard time going to bed Saturday night; so they sleep in Sunday and have a hard time going to bed Sunday night," Avis said. "Monday morning they are tired, and it's hard to wake up for school. They struggle to get back on a good sleep schedule."

Avis recommends a consistent bedtime seven days a week.

"It keeps their clock set so they can go to bed at a certain time, [sleep](#) well through night and wake up well rested the next morning," Avis said.

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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