A Letter to the Editor in Defense of Sleep Recommendations

As an international group of pediatric sleep specialists and health care professionals deeply committed to the health and welfare of children and adolescents, we the undersigned feel compelled to respond to the conclusions outlined in the article “Never Enough Sleep: A Brief History of Sleep Recommendations for Children,” published in Pediatrics, Volume 129, Issue 3, March 2012. In particular, we strenuously challenge the validity of the statement that there is a “universally acknowledged” lack of “meaningful evidence” for sleep recommendations. While we acknowledge there is still much we need to learn and we fully support and encourage additional research on optimal sleep in children, there have been a significant number of rigorous pediatric sleep research studies, many of which were not included in the article, that have done much to help address the issue of optimal sleep duration and healthy sleep practices in children and adolescents. The publication of this article and the unfortunate subsequent sensationalistic media coverage (ie, “100 Years of Sleep Recommendations…ALL WRONG”) have not only misrepresented an entire body of scientific literature, but importantly, may ultimately lead parents to make misinformed and misguided decisions that affect their children’s health and well-being.

In addition, the implication that the discrepancy found by the authors between recommended sleep amounts and hours of sleep actually obtained on average by children and adolescents is essentially due to “inflation” of sleep needs by experts is an oversimplified and misleading interpretation of the study findings. In fact, this new study’s data instead suggest that both parental practices and practitioner recommendations are growing increasingly misaligned with children’s actual biological needs. What we do understand and can state unequivocally is the increasingly compelling evidence for the negative impact of an insufficient quantity and/or quality of sleep on children’s physical and mental health, cognitive function, behavior, and academic success. Consequences for which children from racial/ethnic minorities and those living in poverty may be at even higher risk. There are a large number of cross-sectional and prospective studies that have consistently shown associations between insufficient sleep and a host of adverse health outcomes in children and adolescents, including increased obesity risk, higher rates of motor vehicle accidents and accidental injuries, cardiovascular health, depression, and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, a number of methodologically rigorous experimental studies have demonstrated the negative outcomes of sleep restriction and the positive impact of sleep extension on cognitive function in children and adolescents.

We recognize that there is significant variability in sleep needs from child to child and across age ranges. As a result, there is no single “magic number” for the duration of sleep needed by children of a certain age, and recommendations are always based on a range of hours. Moreover, any guidelines on recommended number of hours of sleep are always given in the context of other clues, which parents can use to determine whether their child or adolescent is receiving sufficient sleep, such as not waking spontaneously in the morning, excessive daytime sleepiness, and requiring additional sleep on weekends and during school vacations. Finally, recommendations regarding sleep amounts are not, as implied by the authors, “stand alone” but are, in fact, just 1 component of empirically based healthy sleep practice guidelines provided to caregivers, which also include such issues as electronics in the bedroom, caffeine consumption, bedtime routines, and regular sleep-wake schedules.

In sum, this article has done a great disservice to children and families as health care consumers by suggesting that current guidelines for healthy sleep amounts are ill-founded, exaggerated, and unreliable, and as advocates for children’s health, we are deeply concerned about the potentially detrimental effect on the health and well-being of children and adolescents around the globe.

Judith A. Owens, MD, MPH
Director of Sleep Medicine
Children’s National Medical Center

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Merrill Wise, MD, Leyla Akanli, MD, Candace Alfano, PhD, Rosana Alves, MD, Thomas Anders, MD, Strahil Atanasov, MD, Dean Beebe, PhD, Julie Boergers, PhD, Tyish Hall Brown, PhD, Oliviero Brun, MD, Joseph A. Buckhalt, PhD, Melissa Burnham, PhD, Kelly C. Byars, PsyD, Margaret-Ann Carno, PhD, MBA, RN, CPNP, Mary Carskadon, PhD, Sanggeeta Chakravorty, MD, Siupun Chan, MD, Maida Chen, MD, Barry A. Cohen, MD, Nicky Cohen, PhD, Penny Corkum, PhD, Lilia Curzi-Dascalova, MD, Michael Dubik, MD, Richard Ferber, MD, Dominic B. Gault, MD, Peter Glusker, MD, PhD, Roger Godbout, PhD, Mark G. Goetting, MD, David Gozal, MD, Michael Gradisar, PhD, Ann Halbower, MD, Shelby F. Harris, PsyD, Allison Harvey, PhD, Jacki Henderson, PhD, Timothy Hoban, MD, Lewis Kass, MD, Sharon Keenan, PhD, Irena Keller, PhD, Declan Kennedy, PhD, Amit Khandha, MD, Michael H. Kohrman, MS, MD, Suresh Kotagal, MD, Sanjeev Kothare, MD, Jyoti Krishna, MD, Monique Lebourgeois, PhD, John F. Leonard, MD, Albin Leong, MD, Robin Lloyd, MD, Matthew C. Lundien, MD, Kurt Lushington, PhD, Cami Matthews, MD, Lisa Meltzer, PhD, Jodi...
REFERENCES


A Letter to the Editor in Defense of Sleep Recommendations
Judith A. Owens

Pediatrics 2012;129;987
DOI: 10.1542/peds.2012-0755A

Updated Information & Services
including high resolution figures, can be found at:
/content/129/5/987.full.html

References
This article cites 25 articles, 2 of which can be accessed free at:
/content/129/5/987.full.html#ref-list-1

Citations
This article has been cited by 2 HighWire-hosted articles:
/content/129/5/987.full.html#related-urls

Subspecialty Collections
This article, along with others on similar topics, appears in the following collection(s):
Developmental/Behavioral Pediatrics
/cgi/collection/development:behavioral_issues_sub
Growth/Development Milestones
/cgi/collection/growth:development_milestones_sub
Psychosocial Issues
/cgi/collection/psychosocial_issues_sub
Psychiatry/Psychology
/cgi/collection/psychiatry_psychology_sub

Permissions & Licensing
Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at:
/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml

Reprints
Information about ordering reprints can be found online:
/site/misc/reprints.xhtml

PEDIATRICS is the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. A monthly publication, it has been published continuously since 1948. PEDIATRICS is owned, published, and trademarked by the American Academy of Pediatrics, 141 Northwest Point Boulevard, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, 60007. Copyright © 2012 by the American Academy of Pediatrics. All rights reserved. Print ISSN: 0031-4005. Online ISSN: 1098-4275.
A Letter to the Editor in Defense of Sleep Recommendations
Judith A. Owens
Pediatrics 2012;129;987
DOI: 10.1542/peds.2012-0755A

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
/content/129/5/987.full.html