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Poor sleep: A powerful — but often ignored — culprit in learning

Howard Margolis

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It blocks learning, causes memory difficulties, depletes energy, incites anxiety, evokes arguments and lays the groundwork for serious behavior and health problems. But when students struggle with reading, writing, math and other problems, it's usually ignored, immeasurably adding to the students' struggles.

The culprit? Poor sleep.

As the National Institute of Health (NIH) notes, poor sleep can cause or exacerbate myriad problems:

"Your ability to function and feel well while you're awake depends on whether you're getting enough total sleep and enough of each type of sleep [e.g., rapid eye movement, deep sleep]. It



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also depends on whether you're sleeping at a time when your body is prepared and ready to sleep. ... Sleep deficiency can interfere with work, school, driving and social functioning.

"You might have trouble learning, focusing and reacting. Also, you might find it hard to judge other people's emotions and reactions. Sleep deficiency also can make you feel frustrated, cranky or worried in social situations. ... Children who are sleep deficient might be overly active and have problems paying attention. They also might misbehave, and their school performance can suffer."

Unfortunately, many children with learning disabilities suffer from sleep problems, problems that can create almost insurmountable barriers to effectively remediating their learning and related problems.

If this is your child, it's important that you do what's needed to help him (or her) overcome his sleep problems. Without directly identifying and addressing his sleep problems, the odds of effectively remediating his learning problems can quickly fade.

To improve these odds, you need to know why we ignore sleep problems and what schools and parents can do. By collaboratively using this information with your child's school, you may significantly increase the odds that he will get the sleep he needs.

If, however, the problem is more complex and intractable, you and your child's school will already have much of the information needed to hone in on the expertise and resources needed to improve his sleep.

Why we ignore sleep problems

First and foremost, many school evaluation, individualized education program (IEP) and Section 504 teams mistakenly believe things like ...

- "Sleep is just sleep. It takes care of itself."
- "It's a parenting issue. Schools have no responsibilities in this area."
- "We don't have the expertise or resources to do anything about it."

Based on their experiences, many parents hold similar views:

- "Kids sleep when they're tired and wake up when they're not."
- "I try to get her to sleep by 8:30 p.m., so she can get eight to nine hours before she gets ready for school. But it doesn't work. Nothing does. So I've stopped trying."

Despite these beliefs and experiences, schools and parents can often do a great deal to help struggling learners with sleep problems caused by poor diets, exercise, schedules, blue light screens and sleep hygiene habits. For more intensive and perhaps biologically-based problems that make learning a struggle, schools can help arrange for and collaborate with physicians, psychologists and applied behavior analysis practitioners who specialize in sleep problems.

What schools can do

Schools have numerous ways to support parents in improving their children's sleep. They can:

Send out information. Hold a series of "better sleep" workshops, webinars, and podcasts for parents and staff, followed by monthly newsletters that discuss both the nature of specific sleep problems and strategies that parents can use to solve them.

Provide sleep hygiene counseling to parents and staff. Sleep hygiene focuses on conditions for sleep and practical actions that parents and children should take. Here are a few: Go to bed

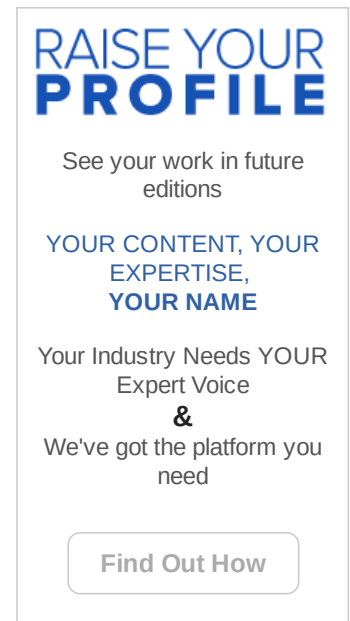


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and wake up at the same time each day; get plenty of sunlight, especially in the morning; exercise daily, preferably in the morning; set your bedroom temperature between 61-and-66 degrees Fahrenheit; darken your bedroom and eliminate all extraneous sounds; avoid blue light devices, such as tablets, computers, smart phones and flat-screen TVs three hours before bedtime.

In many instances, establishing good sleep-hygiene environments and habits eliminates sleep problems. Though suggestions for sleep hygiene are easy to understand, they can prove difficult to implement, especially for parents struggling to make ends meet.

Offer the services of behavioral experts. They can help parents design and implement personalized in-home sleep programs, such as a basic sleep-hygiene program that has the child going to bed at the same time nightly. Some children will resist. If so, a simple, well-designed program of applied behavior analysis may well engender the child's cooperation.

Provide a medical evaluation. This should be consistent with the regulations for the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) of 2004: "Medical services means services provided by a licensed physician to determine a child's medically related disability that results in the child's need for special education and related services (§ 300.34) ... Specific documentation for the eligibility determination ... for a child suspected of having a specific learning disability ... must contain a statement of the educationally relevant medical findings, if any (§ 300.311)."

If poor sleep is identified as a medically-relevant aspect of a learner's disability that impedes his learning, schools have no obligation to provide ongoing healthcare from a physician. However, schools may need to provide the ongoing assistance of a school nurse to help plan and monitor the struggling learner's sleep program.

If this proves insufficient, the nurse's and physician's information may prove invaluable in identifying the next steps, including assistance from a board-certified sleep specialist, expert in behavioral approaches to overcoming sleep problems.

Have a psychologist examine the child. Have an expert in addressing the psychological and learning aspects of sleep problems provide an in-depth evaluation of the child's sleep difficulties. If the child's learning problems are due to or exacerbated by his sleep problems, this may be an aspect of his learning disabilities that requires evaluation under IDEA's mandate to evaluate children in all areas of suspected disability. By not addressing the sustaining causes of a child's struggles with learning, schools will unwittingly perpetuate the struggles.

Think of it this way. If struggling learners don't get enough protein, their muscles will start to deteriorate, they'll feel weak and irritable and they'll have considerable difficulty resisting infections. Counseling won't solve the problem. Neither will the Wilson reading program or a highly knowledgeable, highly skilled, energetic teacher. Only protein will solve it.

So it is with children's sleep problems: Only nightly, quality sleep will solve them. And if, to a large degree, poor sleep is causing or worsening children's struggles, solving their sleep problems is critical to accelerating their progress.

Use the school's social worker. Identify and mobilize appropriate community resources to improve your child's sleep. Making such a request is consistent with IDEA's federal regulations, which state that "social work services in schools includes ... mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible in ... [his or her] educational program."

Beside genuinely caring for the welfare of all their students, which the vast majority of teachers and administrators do, schools have three other incentives for helping parents help their children: ethical, moral and financial.

Why financial? Because solving sleep problems sooner rather than later can create less need for special education spending as struggling learners with sleep problems start making more progress, needing fewer services, which saves money.

What parents can do

You can learn, learn and learn about your child's special education rights.

You can work with a board-certified sleep specialist — not easy, given the current state of medical insurance.

You can work collaboratively with the school to ensure your child gets the evaluation, diagnostic and IEP services he needs and to which he's entitled. This may prevent 13-year-old Vince's problem: "He's a great, loving, curious kid, but when he doesn't get a good night's sleep, he's a monster."

You can make sure your child's program is not too taxing. One way, in the IEP, is to avoid subject-stacking schedules that may take the form of three cognitively taxing courses in a row: math, science, reading and writing, then gym. Better to reduce the cognitive demands on your child and increase his readiness for learning by having math, science, gym, then reading and writing.

What everyone should take seriously

Dr. Penelope A. Lewis, a neuroscientist, runs the University of Manchester's Sleep and Memory Lab. To her, it's abundantly clear that sleep problems are not trivial — they're serious. They're problems that deserve serious attention.

Sleep is absolutely critical to feeling good and being able to function normally. It helps to keep your body healthy by regulating immune function and temperature, and it is also essential for maintaining mood, constructing memories, updating your general world knowledge and helping you to take an overview of difficult problems.

Sleep is sometimes referred to as the best cognitive enhancer on the market, meaning it beats all the drugs hands down. It may even be the key to superior IQ.

The bottom line is sleep is good for you. It is something your body needs and your brain thrives on. None one can afford to skimp on sleep.

My advice? Learn all you can about your child's special education rights and his sleep problems. Share relevant, authoritative information about sleep with all the school personnel involved with your child.

Finally, don't get upset if they initially know little about sleep problems and their importance. Once — as a highly knowledgeable professor, consultant, speaker, author and journal editor — I didn't.

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About the Author



Howard Margolis is editor emeritus of the Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties, founding editor of the Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, professor emeritus of reading disabilities and special education at Queens College of CUNY, and co-author of "Reading Disabilities: Beating the Odds" and "Negotiating Your Child's IEP: A Step-by-Step Guide." He has a consulting practice in southern New Jersey, outside of Philadelphia, where he consults to schools and families about special education, dyslexia and other reading disabilities.



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Jackie Pate · Greensboro, North Carolina

I'm an adult who can not get a good quality sleep. I've been to a sleep study and they say I don't have sleep apnea, that I just don't go into a deep restorative sleep. This started 24 years ago and I take two medications that put me to sleep, but very little fuel to run on. I have all the characteristics listed above. But no one seems to know why I can't get into restorative sleep. Maybe twice a year I can, and feel great the next day, but it comes back. Any suggestions?

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Howard Margolis · Voorhees Township, New Jersey

Hi -- Keeping in mind that I am not an expert or specialist in the clinical aspects of sleep or a medical practitioner but a special educator, here are 3 books that may prove helpful.

- 1- Chapter 13 of The Secret World of Sleep (Lewis)
- 2- Sleep Smarter (Shawn Stevenson). Practical, but may have cherry-picked research and may exaggerate. Nevertheless, well worth studying.
- 3- Why We Sleep (M Walker)

Keeping a sleep diary that tracks your daily exercise (time of day, length, intensity) and lists and analyzes what you've eaten (names and amount of foods, nutritional values) can help.

It may be helpful to consult with a Board-Certified Sleep Specialist whose practice focuses on sleep. Be careful of wild claims and people without extensive clinical training from legitimate university or medical school programs.

Beware of drugs, especially over-the-counter ones. – Good luck.

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Marla King

On your list of what to do, might I also suggest your school nurse? Medical concerns are usually addressed by the school health nurse in collaboration with the other professionals listed. Nice article.

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Marylee Margolis · Moore College of Art & Design

Thanks. My omission. You're right.

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