

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS REGARDING CHILDREN'S SLEEP & HEALTH

What is the optimal amount of sleep for children's health?

There are sleep guidelines that recommend how much sleep children should get at different ages. However, these are based on children's average sleep patterns, not on whether sleep duration is related to children's health and wellbeing.

We looked at the sleep of more than 4,000 Australian children who are all part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. Part of this study is a detailed diary that parents fill out to record every activity their child does over 24 hours. This diary includes their child's sleep.

Encouragingly, our study found that sleep duration at any one age is not a clear indicator of health and wellbeing. However, we know that sleep *problems* are common in the early years are associated with poorer health and wellbeing both for children and their parents. So the next step in our research is to find out what is driving this. It may be that other aspects of sleep are the most important parts of sleep for health and wellbeing. For example, this could be timing (going to bed and waking up), the amount a child wakes during the night and how long they are awake for, or short sleep duration over years rather than at one age only.

What is the difference between sleep duration and sleep problems and how does this affect children's health?

Sleep duration typically means the amount of time a child is asleep overnight or over a 24-hour period. The definition of sleep problems varies. We usually ask parents if their child's sleep is a problem for them, which makes it parent-defined (most frequently, parents say the problems are getting a child to sleep at the start of the night and waking during the night).

Other research groups might use specific criteria around sleep duration, timing and wakes. We know that children's sleep problems are associated with poorer health and wellbeing for children and their parents.

Why do current guidelines around sleep duration need to be updated? What do current guidelines advise?

Guidelines are based on children's average sleep patterns, not on whether sleep duration is related to children's health and wellbeing. When we started our research, we expected to find that short sleep duration would be associated with poorer health and wellbeing in children.

We were surprised to find that there were no clear associations between how much children slept and their behaviour and wellbeing. Encouragingly, this means that sleep duration at any one age is not a clear indicator of health and wellbeing.

If sleep duration doesn't affect children's health, what other sleep issues have been found to impact their health?

We found that the amount of sleep alone is not the most important thing for children's health and wellbeing. However, we know that sleep is important for health and wellbeing, so it may be that other aspects of sleep are more important. This might be timing (going to bed and waking up), the amount a child wakes during the night and how long they are awake for, or short sleep duration over years rather than at one age only.

How much sleep is 'normal' for kids?

There is a huge range in the 'normal' sleep patterns of Australian children. For example, there can be eight hours difference per day in the amount of time some babies and children sleep. While some babies sleep 10 hours a day, others sleep 18; while some 9-year-olds sleep 6 hours a day, others sleep 14.

In our study we didn't find there was an amount of sleep that children should be getting. We're now working to find out if there are optimal sleep patterns that families should aim for – for example, bed and wake times, or reducing wakes overnight.

How can I ensure my child gets a good night's sleep?

Set up good sleep habits. This involves a routine (e.g. setting up regular bed and wake times, relaxing before sleep), a healthy sleep environment (e.g. reducing noise and lights, helping your child to feel safe) and good health and nutrition (e.g. eating regular meals, avoiding caffeine and getting exercise).

For more information, please visit the sleep pages at the Raising Children Network website, www.raisingchildren.net.au (listed by age group e.g. newborns, babies, toddlers, preschoolers, school-age), or speak to your GP or child and family health nurse.