

Feeling Sleepy?

As you read this article, notice how it is organized. Think about how you might show the main ideas and supporting details in an outline.

“I have to be dragged out of bed,” says Paul, 9. “It would take 20 alarm clocks to get me up.”

Paul is not alone. Mara, 8, says her dad drags her out of bed, too. In fact, when we talked to kids, we discovered that the one thing you hate more than going to bed is getting up in the morning.

The reason: You need more sleep! The kids we surveyed get anywhere from 45 to 75 minutes too little sleep each night.

Zombie Zone

Missing Z’s can create big problems. “When I’m sleepy, I can’t do much,” says Rosalie, 9. “I walk with my eyelids drooping.”

Scientists aren’t exactly sure why sleep is so important. Many think sleep helps your muscles repair themselves and gives our brains time to store “data” received during the day. Sleep may also help us fight disease. (That could explain why having a cold makes you feel like snoozing all day.)

One thing is certain. “Not getting enough sleep affects every part of your life,” says Dr. Mary Carskadon, a scientist who studies snoozers. Sleepy kids have difficulty concentrating on school, friends – even on baseballs zooming past their noses.

Drooping Grades

“Sometimes during school, I put my head on my desk and drift off,” says Elizabeth, 11. Desktop **catnaps** might make you feel better, but they might also show up on your report card. According to Dr. Carskadon’s research, kids who earn mainly A’s and B’s go to bed earlier than those who get D’s and F’s. In one study, kids who got bad grades slept about 35 minutes less each night than their honor-roll classmates.

Friendship Fumbles

Losing sleep may also mean losing friends. Why? The reason is that sleep may help kids control their emotions, says sleep researcher Carol Leotta. Lack of slumber can lead to more fights with friends, family, teachers, and others.

Sports Strikeout

If you want to be a high scorer on your basketball team, you can forget catching the “Late Show.” Dr. Carskadon says, “Not getting enough sleep slows your *reaction time*.” That’s how long it takes you to respond to something in your environment, like an opening on the court or a clear shot for the basket. To speed up your reactions and improve your game, take a tip from the pros: Go to bed early the night before the game.

Double Whammy

But the kids we talked to say it's not that easy: After-school sports practices, TV, and loads of homework makes it tough to get to bed on time. "And when I spend the night at a friend's we usually stay up until about 2 A.M.," added Pat.

These "social" reasons for staying awake are only half the problem, says Dr. Carskadon. Her research shows that as your body matures, your brain waits until later at night to release a chemical that makes you sleepy. In other words, it's natural for teens and almost-teens to crawl into bed and fall asleep later.

Pulling the Plug

Staying up later would be no big deal if you could wake up later, too. You'd just be resetting your **internal "clock"** (the part of your brain that controls your body's **functions**) to run on a later schedule. But if you drag yourself out of bed for an early-morning soccer game or to catch the school bus, you can expect to feel like a zombie.

That's because all sleep is not equal. The last hour of sleep, like the highest level on a video game, is worth more. But getting to that high level requires sleeping through all the lower levels first. Waking up too soon is like pulling the plug in the middle of the game.

Sleep Solutions

One way to make sure you get enough sleep is to stick to a regular schedule. It will be easier to fall asleep – and get up – if you go to bed at the same time every night.

Elizabeth tried to end her school day snoozes by going to bed earlier – at 8:30 instead of 9:45. The change wasn't an immediate success, however. "Last night, I was in bed by 8:30," she reported. "But I finally got to sleep at about 11 o'clock."

If you want to reset your bedtime, Dr. Carskadon says, you need to be patient. Your internal clock is easy to set to a later sleep time – but **readjusting** to an earlier schedule is more challenging. For the best results, try moving your bedtime 15 minutes earlier each night.

Soothing music may also help. Max, 12, puts on a CD and says, "I'm usually asleep halfway through." Scientists also say to avoid exercise right before bed. And stay away from sugary foods; the energy boosts might make you think you're not tired.

Afternoon naps can also help you feel rested. Just make sure you don't nap too close to bedtime. That can make falling asleep at night harder.

The good news: You won't always need as much sleep as you do now. Most adults would be happy with an eight-hour snooze. So enjoy your Z's while you can!