

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Sleep

axis

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[Teenage sleep deprivation] certainly plays into learning and memory. It plays into appetite and metabolism and weight gain. It plays into mood and emotion, which are already heightened at that age. It also plays into risk behaviors—taking risks while driving, taking risks with substances, taking risks maybe with sexual activity. So the more we look outside, the more we’re learning about the core role that sleep plays.

— [Mary Carskadon, PhD](#), sleep and adolescence expert

“I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead!”

We adults know that, sometimes, there's nothing better than laying down to sleep after a long day. And the Internet is [rife with memes](#) about how being an adult is less about freedom, independence, and doing whatever we want and more about just being able to get enough sleep. So when our teenagers basically have sleeping superpowers, yet fight us when it's time to go to bed *and* when it's time to get out of bed, it can be extremely frustrating. But God designed us for rest, rejuvenation, and, yes, sleep, so how can we help them see it as a gift and as a way to honor Him by honoring their bodies?

Teen sleep habits and needs are influenced by much more than wanting to rest. This Parent Guide will help you understand your teen's sleep needs and give you tools to help your teen create better sleep habits. God designed us with mind, body, *and* spirit, so it's important that we see how each of these is inextricably linked to each other and how an imbalance in one tremendously impacts the others.

— How much sleep do teenagers need?

Physiologically, they need [8 to 10 hours](#) of sleep per night. Tell that to any teen (or parent of one, for that matter), and they will scoff at you. Who has time for that much sleep in this day and age? Apparently, not many: [Only 8% of teenagers](#) get the sleep they need each night. That means that, in an average high school in the US with [500 students](#), only 40 students are *not* sleep deprived.

— Why do they need so much sleep?

Sleep plays an important role in the mental and physical growth that comes with puberty, allowing the body rest and energy to grow. Additionally, [puberty changes many hormones](#), including melatonin, a main hormone in controlling sleep cycles. At the onset of puberty, melatonin production [is shifted](#) to later at night, starting around 11pm, meaning the cycle doesn't end until later in the morning. So because teenagers don't get sleepy until around 11pm, going to bed earlier often doesn't help; their bodies would not want to fall asleep. This is also why they're often zombies in the morning—their bodies are doing everything they can to say, “You need to sleep now!”

Biblically speaking, proper amounts of sleep and rest are an integral part of the very fabric of creation. God instituted a day of rest not just for mankind, but for the universe as a whole. Interestingly enough, Adam's first full day in the garden was a day of rest, not work. From a Hebraic perspective, each new day begins at sundown, not sun-up, so the first thing faithful Jews do to start their day is sleep! In God's economy, we sleep first, *then* we work and play, not the other way around. When we rest, we join in the very rhythm God established within His created order of working and resting, of expending and replenishing. When we realize rest's regenerative and restorative power to renew us each day into the fully human beings God created us to be, we can recognize it not only as an act of worship, but also a beautiful gift from God. And because of the physiological needs mentioned above, it's even more paramount that teenagers understand how God wove the need for sleep into the very fabric of our beings.

— What prevents them from getting the sleep they need?

An obvious thief of this much-needed sleep time is school, so much so that several schools in California are changing the start of the school day in order to help students get more sleep. Who can get 8 to 10 hours of sleep when you have to wake up at 6am to get ready for school?! Even if they were able to go to bed at 11pm—something many teens don't have the luxury of doing, thanks to homework, sports, other extracurriculars, and part-time jobs—they'd still only get a maximum of seven hours of sleep. Add to that a crunch week for a big paper or an away tournament and BAM! Less than 7 hours of sleep on a regular basis, with nights of 4 to 5 hours frequently thrown in. That's at least [2 to 3 hours of sleep debt](#) (more on this below) compounding every night, for possibly months on end.

There's also social pressure that may subtract even further from their rest. If you set a curfew of 10pm so they can get to sleep by 11pm, your kids will feel major FOMO when their friends are doing something without them. They might even feel pressure to stay up late in their bedrooms, texting or interacting with them on social media or playing video games. So even a good bedtime can be ruined by everything teens have on their plate.

This brings up another culprit: technology. Screen time [has been clearly linked](#) to loss of sleep, both in adolescents and pre-adolescents. Whether it's the phone in the bedroom or TV before bed, [electronic devices contribute](#) to less sleep. So phones, tablets, TVs, and computers in the bedroom are a bad idea, not just for sleep, but also for mental health (social media) and addiction (pornography).

Finally, sometimes a teen simply doesn't have the self-discipline or the right perspective to maintain good sleep habits. If they don't want to sleep, that's half the issue. Why sleep when you need to work harder and achieve more? Or, for some, sleeping gets in the way of playing on their phones or binge Netflix to their hearts' content. One high school senior told us unabashedly she usually got only 3 to 4 hours of sleep per night, saying that she typically scrolled through social media and watched YouTube videos on her phone until it died (the charging cord wouldn't reach her bed), then she'd pull out her laptop to watch more YouTube videos until she fell asleep around 1 or 2am. She'd then wake up every morning at 5am to make sure her hair and makeup were perfect for school. And for her, her social life and knowing what's going on in her world was far more important than the sleep she lost to achieve it.

— What happens to their bodies when they don't get enough?

The widespread sleep deprivation among our nation's youth, what some have called "[an epidemic](#)" or "[The Great Sleep Recession](#)," may be connected to many of the common issues they're facing. Let's take a look at [what goes wrong with the body](#) when it doesn't get enough sleep.

Dexterity. Without enough rest, the body loses much of its adroitness. In other words, not sleeping enough [makes you clumsy](#), both physically and mentally. This is not something to

be taken lightly, [especially for teens of driving age](#), but also for non-driving ones. Horrible accidents [can happen anywhere](#) if one is tired enough to not be alert.

Mood and Behavior. Also, sleep deprivation can greatly affect a teen's mood and behavior. You may notice they get testy or grumpy during exam week or other high-stress times. A huge contributor to this is lack of sleep during those times and even in general. They may make your life miserable with their attitude, but [they're miserable, too](#), and can't seem to shake the feeling.

Weight Gain. [A recent study](#) by the University of Colorado revealed that "one week of sleeping about five hours a night led participants to gain an average of two pounds." Sleep deprivation causes changes in body chemistry and hinders the body's ability to process and break-down sugars.

Impulsive Behavior. Tiredness decreases one's ability to self-regulate. Self-control is already something teens have to work hard to develop, and sleep loss makes it really easy to just give in. Whether it's eating when you know you shouldn't, doing something you know you shouldn't, or failing to do something you know you should, self-regulation can be a real struggle [when sleep deprived](#).

Similarly, tiredness and risky behavior go hand in hand. Sleep-deprived teens [are much more likely](#) to make poor and risky decisions—anything from driving drowsy to consuming alcohol and drugs to making compromising sexual choices.

Mental Illness. Perhaps most importantly, there's a [strong correlation](#) between sleep deprivation and mental illnesses. A lack of sleep can trigger [anxiety](#), depression, [suicidal tendencies](#), and a myriad of other common mental issues. Not only that, but sleep loss can also exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues, making recovery much more difficult.

— What happens in their lives when they don't get enough?

As if the already-listed effects weren't enough, sleep deprivation can affect other sectors of teens' lives, too. For example, reduced sleep causes daytime sleepiness, which causes reduced attention throughout the day, which causes [declines in academic performance](#). This is perhaps the most noticeable and/or discussed symptom in tired teens, and understandably so. You want them to succeed for their own future. However, it's often this pressure to succeed that makes teens give up sleep for academics, causing them to struggle more in academics. Next time your teen's grades drop, among other things, make sure they get enough sleep to bounce back; don't let them dig the hole deeper by staying up even later!

Another big problem a sleep-deprived teen will encounter is strain on their relationships through irritability and moodiness. You will certainly encounter this, too, as parents often bear the brunt of their kids' raw emotions. Your teen having a bad attitude is not the only issue; it's also problematic that their attitude corrodes relationships they need and want—like their relationships with you, other family members, friends, or even a significant other. They may cherish these relationships, but act rudely instead because of the effects of

sleep loss. In that circumstance, an attitude check and apology is in order, but so is some proper sleep.

Look at the big picture for a minute. Sleep deprivation impairs body functionality, mental processing, action judgment, and may trigger mental illness. Any of these losses could impact your teen when sleep deprived, possibly causing them to do something with dire consequences, perhaps something they experience the consequences from for a long time. That could mean injuries sustained from a car accident caused by driving drowsy, struggling against suicidal thoughts and depression, academic failure, or pushing away a person that was important. These have big ramifications and can stem *solely* from getting too little sleep. It's not a given, but sleep deprivation invites trouble.

— What's sleep debt, and how is it repaid?

Sleep debt is a term used for the accumulation of sleep loss over time. When your body gets too little rest, it hungers for that lost sleep to be repaid. Over a long period of time undergoing sleep loss, this builds up to be sleep debt.

The bad news is that sleep debt [is cumulative](#). The good news is that it isn't as unforgiving as other debts. There are no interest rates, and you don't even have to pay back every hour you missed. *But* your body does need some of that sleep back. Here's what [Harvard Health](#) suggests for repaying your sleep debt:

- **Settle short-term debt.** If you missed 10 hours of sleep over the course of a week, add 3 to 4 extra sleep hours on the weekend and an extra hour or 2 per night the following week until you have repaid the debt fully.
- **Address a long-term debt.** If you've shorted yourself on sleep for decades, you won't be required to put in a [Rip-Van-Winkle](#)-like effort to repay the hours of missed slumber. Nonetheless, it could take a few weeks to recoup your losses. Plan a vacation with a light schedule and few obligations—*not* a whirlwind tour of the museums of Europe or a child's wedding. Then, turn off the alarm clock and just sleep every night until you awaken naturally. At the beginning, you may be sleeping 12 hours or more a night; by the end, you'll be getting about the amount you regularly need to awaken refreshed.

If your teen is severely in sleep debt, then planning a sleep-intentional vacation may be a great idea. It doesn't have to be anything elaborate, but try to make it something that breaks up their regular routine and allows them to focus on resting.

- **Avoid backsliding into a new debt cycle.** Once you've determined how much sleep you really need, factor it into your daily schedule. Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day—at the very least, on weekdays. If need be, use weekends to make up for lost sleep.

The goal is to wake up before your alarm, naturally, and then continue to get enough sleep afterward! Unfortunately, this may not always be feasible in your teen's busy life. Even if they repay their short-term sleep debt from each week during the weekends, they will still be tired during the weekdays. So [here are a few tips](#) you can use to help them function

optimally when tired: go out in the sunlight, exercise, hydrate, nap, and avoid multitasking. Additionally, see [this great article](#) on getting more sleep during finals week.

— So how do I help my teenager get enough sleep?

First, [talk with them](#) about how important sleep is. Give them all the facts we've already mentioned, but, depending on your child's personality, it may be better to approach it from how getting good sleep [can improve](#) their lives (e.g. by lowering stress, warding off depression, helping them avoid accidents, improving grades, boosting athletic performance, inspiring creativity, and maintaining a healthy weight). Helping them see the importance of sleep is paramount because then they will be more willing to establish good habits for themselves.

Second, lead by example. Though we're focusing on teens in this Guide, statistics show there's been a decline in sleep [for people of all ages](#), not just teens (though it seems to be most acute in teens). This means that you're likely sleep deprived as well, or at least have poor sleeping habits. Because Gen Z is all about authenticity, as well as understanding why something matters, modeling for your teen how to create good sleep habits will go a long way.

Third, be consistent. This means going to sleep and waking up [at the same time](#) each day, even on the weekends. It's fun to stay up late, and it feels good to sleep in. However, big shifts in your teen's sleep schedule like that is [like experiencing](#) a "Washington to Hawaii time-zone change twice a week." You need your teen's body clock to find a rhythm, so once you establish a routine, [stick to it](#), even in the summer! [Studies show](#) that it helps if your teen is in bed with no phone and the lights out, even if they don't fall asleep. (Of course, circumstances don't always allow for such rigidity, so when they have to stay up late for a big game or to study or for a school dance, allow them the chance to sleep in on the next available day.)

Fourth, consider a sleep tracker. We often *think* we're getting a certain amount of sleep each night, but trackers (like a FitBit watch) can reveal what's actually going on. Though not perfectly accurate, they can give someone a general idea of how long they were asleep, how often they woke up, and even how much time they spent in each stage of sleep. For some teenagers, having the data can be eye-opening, as well as good motivation for doing better on subsequent nights.

Finally, if the opportunity arises, advocate for later school start times in your area. It has been shown that later school start times [decrease driving accidents](#), and those students also show [fewer absences and higher grades](#).

— How do I help my kid get better sleep?

Sometimes, it's not enough to simply carve out a certain amount of time for sleep. The quality of our sleep also matters, and many of the things we and our kids do actually sabotage our ability to sleep well. If your teen is tired despite having enough time for sleep,

some of the following suggestions could also make a big difference.

Create a peaceful sleep space. Quiet, dark, and comfortable are a must. Use an eye mask or earplugs if needed. Temperature is also an important factor. Many recommend a [cool room with enough blankets](#) to stay warm. Use a fan if necessary. This is mostly up to your teen's preference, but you can help them explore the options and optimize their sleep space.

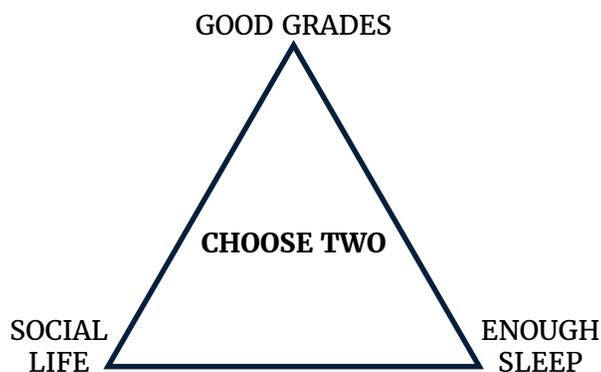
However, there are a few things that should not be decided by preference. First, remove glowing clocks and other electronics that flash or glow. [Clocks can be a menace](#) when trying to fall asleep, tantalizingly chronicling each waking moment. It's best that they go (or are covered up if being used as an alarm). **Most importantly, phones should not be allowed in bedrooms at night for optimal sleep.** Not only is it too tempting to keep scrolling through our feeds or play "just one more game," but the screen's blue light also [suppresses melatonin](#) (even with something like [Night Shift](#) enabled). Last, protect the bedroom's purpose by making the bed [just for sleeping](#). Teens love to do other things on their beds, like surf the Internet, catch up on social media, or watch TV and movies. However, then the bed becomes a multi-purpose place, not signalling the body it is time for sleep. If the bed has the sole purpose of sleep, it will help the body adjust to the sleep schedule.

Establish a sleep routine. This may be the most important part of sleep hygiene, because it tells your body that it's time for bed. Find a [screen-free](#), wind-down activity that your teen or family can do every night to prepare for bed, preferably between 15-minutes and one-hour long. Some good choices [include](#) drinking caffeine-free tea, breathing exercises, prayer or meditation, journaling, reading, listening to relaxing music, showering/bathing, or light stretching. Do this activity every night to prime your bodies for sleep.

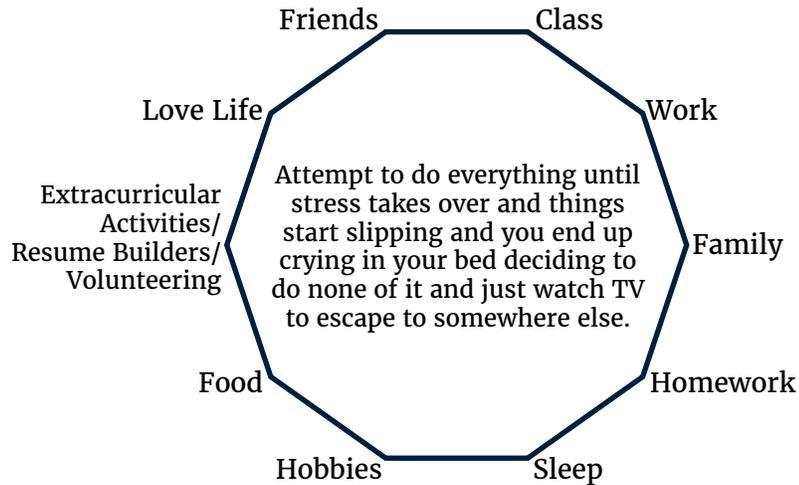
Other aspects of sleep hygiene include: [avoiding caffeine](#) and [other stimulants](#) starting at least six hours before your sleep routine; regular exercise, even just 10 minutes of aerobic exercise, at least 3 hours prior to going to bed; watching what you eat, both for dinner and snacks, as fatty and spicy foods may disrupt sleep; syncing your biological clock with natural light; [setting a media curfew](#); and [sleeping when sleepy](#) (i.e. getting up and doing something calming if you can't fall asleep).

— Where's the balance between sleep, school, fun, and rest?

Here's the rub. The balance between sleep, academics, and social or extracurricular responsibilities can be so hard to strike. You may have heard of the decision triangle:



There never seems to be enough time in the day for everything. When you can only choose two, sleep is usually the first one to suffer. But the triangle is actually too simple to reflect real life, so someone redesigned the graphic to [look like this](#):



Honestly, sometimes your teen probably does feel this way, *especially* when in sleep debt, as everything can feel so much more overwhelming then. Striking the balance can seem impossible. So what can you do to help?

First, practice and teach [good time management](#). Use daily goals, prioritization, and scheduling to organize your life. As you teach this to your teens, they will better be able to handle all the stressors on their plate. Only when they can avoid distractions and procrastination, they will be able to protect their sleep.

Until that point (as it takes much practice and discipline), you'll have to strike that balance for them to some extent. For example, you can protect their sleep time by setting media curfews and house rules on bedtimes, etc. Some parents have even [tied driving privileges to proper sleep](#): "If you don't sleep, you don't drive." Another strategy for protecting your teen's sleep time is keeping your teen (and family, for that matter) away from overcommitment by teaching them to set healthy boundaries.

Last, simplify and streamline. This is closely linked to avoiding overcommitment, but also includes organizing the things you choose to do. Maybe this means planning the week out on Sunday, or simply making school lunches the night before instead of in the morning. Anything that can lessen stress and/or make things easier is worth the extra coordination up front.

Still, there just may not be enough hours in the day. If, after all your efforts, your teen cannot get enough sleep, you can at least help them rest. Help them find something that rejuvenates them, that reminds them that they are free to rest in Christ. Perhaps this is as simple as church on Sunday. Or maybe it means a media fast once a month. Whatever it is, finding rest is an essential companion to our busy lives and is just as important as actual sleep. See our [Parent's Guide to Sabbath and Rest](#) for more on this concept.

— What if my teen struggles to fall asleep, even when sleepy?

A big problem in this area is the body's biological clock being off. If your teen has been going to sleep at 2am, it will be *very* difficult for them to fall asleep at 11pm. Here are some great tips for [shifting from being](#) a night owl to an early bird. And, of course, sleep hygiene is essential here, too.

Some people use [natural sleep aids](#), such as teas and essential oils. "Sleepytime" teas include soothing herbs like chamomile and peppermint that have a calming effect. Lavender is also considered a calming scent, used in many "sleep" oil blends, and can be diffused into the air. There are many other natural sleep aids, like magnesium or melatonin, that may be effective. However, **many sleep aids (both synthetic and natural) are NOT RECOMMENDED for teens and children**, so be sure to consult your pediatrician before trying anything new.

In addition, your teen's inability to fall asleep may just have to do with their [stress level](#). Anxiety is often a thief of sleep, keeping the brain awake and worrying instead of resting. Help them [establish practices](#) to combat stress and anxiety, like writing down their thoughts before bed, doing breathing exercises, spending time with a pet, or practicing mindfulness. This will take some [experimentation](#), but the solution will be worth it.

Note: It's possible your teen has issues that need a diagnosis and treatment plan, like sleep apnea or insomnia. If you suspect that's the case, please seek professional help immediately.

— What if my kid sleeps too much?

This is more often a problem connected with sleep deprivation than by itself, but sometimes teens oversleep—by a lot. If they're repaying their sleep debt, this is probably a good thing. However, oversleeping can be caused by some other troubling things, namely depression, anxiety, and suicidality. If their sleep debt is repaid, it's not recommended to get more than what they need each night. In fact, [a study has shown](#) that not only is too little sleep a risk factor for suicidal thoughts in teens, but **too much sleep is as well**. The same applies to depression and anxiety. The logic is, "Why face the depressing and stress-filled world when you can escape into sleep?" While it may feel good mentally to do so, physically your body needs both sleeping and waking hours. Try implementing many of the sleep hygiene tips mentioned in this article. If you can help them fix their sleep, those other problems may not seem too overwhelming to handle.

Note: Please seek professional help immediately if your teen is dealing with any of these issues.

— Discussion Questions

- How much sleep do you get on average?
- How much sleep do you think you need each night?

- Do you notice anything when you get more sleep?
- How do you think sleep affects you?
- What makes you sleep well?
- Do you notice any patterns when you can't sleep?
- Do you ever feel down or drained at the end of a long week?
- What would your ideal schedule be?
- How can you protect your sleep time?
- How can I protect your sleep time?
- Is sleep ever a way to escape from the day's stresses?
- Why do you think God gave us physical bodies?
- Why do you think He designed those bodies to need rest every single day?
- Do you ever feel guilty for wanting to sleep? Why/why not?
- What would it look like to treat sleep as a gift from God?
- How can I make our home better for sleep?

Final Thoughts

Good sleep is essential for a healthy, balanced life. It can improve grades, agility, mood, and body weight, among many other things. Conversely, too little sleep can be a huge problem! Because God created us with physical bodies, it's just as important that we take care of them as it is to care of our minds and souls, even if it means saying no to doing too much.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a *free* weekly email that covers all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Teen FOMO](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Sabbath & Rest](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Depression & Anxiety](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention](#)
- A Parent's Guide to Fitness (coming soon to axis.org/guides)

If you'd like access to all of our resources, both current and yet to come, for one low monthly or yearly price, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- ["Among Teens, Sleep Deprivation an Epidemic,"](#) Stanford Medicine
- ["Twelve Simple Tips to Improve Your Sleep,"](#) Harvard Medical School
- [Sleep.org](#): The National Sleep Foundation's website with short, helpful articles on all matters sleep-related. See specifically:
 - ["Become an Early Bird"](#)
 - ["Cramming for Finals"](#)
 - ["Bad Evening Habits"](#)
 - ["How to Run on Empty"](#)
 - ["How to Sleep Better If You're Stressed"](#)

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