

Having too much fun at a friend's party a few weeks ago, I kept the kids up too late. And while we were all having fun at the party and no one showed signs of tiredness at the time, we all paid the next day. The late night for the kids totally threw our next day off. There was such an extreme change from our kid's typical behavior, that my husband and I vowed never to keep them out that late again.

Later that week, I participated in a webinar hosted by best-selling author Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, Ed.D and the Minnesota Department of Education. It was an online presentation titled "Sleepless in America: Is Your Child Misbehaving or Missing Sleep?" I realized, after that webinar, that I hadn't been a good steward of my child's sleep needs. The term "protect their sleep" came up several times in the webinar and it was something that really stuck with me. Kurcinka's presentation was full of convincing information as to why it's important to protect children's sleep and I'd like to share some of it with you.

Kurcinka spoke about the emotional signs of a tired child. A child who loses it over little things, gets easily frustrated and is generally irritable and cranky is likely sleep deprived. More serious emotional and physical signs of a sleep-deprived child, according to Kurcinka, are complaints of stomach and headaches and a general sense of anxiety. She also mentioned that a child's ability to focus and pay attention at school is greatly affected by how much sleep a student receives. She stated a study that showed 41 minutes of sleep deprivation effected math performance of students.

One of her first pieces of advice is to pick up on a child's tiredness cues. Kurcinka ranks tiredness in stages from 1 to 3. She advises to catch kids at stage 1 tiredness and start nap or bedtime routine then. Stage 1 is when children have red and glazed eyes and slowing of motions. If not put to sleep or winding down at stage 1, kids then progress to stage 2, which is rubbing of eyes, yawning and irritability. At stage 2 it becomes more difficult to put a child to sleep. By stage 3, which includes frenzied behavior, hyperactivity and crying, the opportunity to put a child to sleep has been missed and the stages will likely have to start again before a child will calmly go to sleep. The stage 1 window will typically present itself between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes later.

Kurcinka also said "A good night's sleep begins in the morning." She encourages families to start a morning routine that begins with dressing, brushing hair and teeth and steering away from the television. She also encourages children to eat six mini-meals a day with at least one of those meals being eaten with the entire family.

Kurcinka differentiates between evening and sleep activities. She states that evening activities happen before dinner and include things such as bathing/showering, reading and quiet play should be coupled with gradually dimming the lights and limiting electronics. Sleep routine activities happen after dinner and further prepare a child's body for quality sleep. Sleep routine activities should be limited to connecting with an

adult, calming their body for sleep, a quick snack (if needed), a visit to the bathroom and a good night hug and kiss from parents.

Kurcinka mentioned several quick tips to improve a child's sleep. For a child who wakes in the night and has a hard time returning to sleep, leave a thermos of cold water near their bed. The cold liquid will lower their body temperature, which helps them get back to sleep easier. Another tip was to have children eat breakfast within 30 minutes of waking up. She claims that breakfast starts the body clock and should begin as soon as possible after waking up.

As a parent, I have benefited from Kurcinka's strategies. It seemed as though my kids never quite managed transitions for bedtime well. Moving the kid's bathtime and playtime to the afternoon has drastically improved our sleep routine. There are two less transitions during the evening which make for happier kids and parents. I hope some of the information I've shared with you today helps your family as well.

For additional information on Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, visit her website www.parentchildhelp.com, or check out her book, *Sleepless in America*.