

# Expert: Sticking to a Summer Sleep Schedule Has a Big Impact on Kids

*By Paige Towers • June 8, 2016 at 6:59pm*

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Summer is nearly here, which means parents everywhere are asking themselves, “How will I keep the kids busy enough so as not to drive me insane?” Yet, with longer days, no school bus to catch in the morning and a nightly chorus of little voices pleading to let them stay up “just a little bit longer,” perhaps the more important question is, “How will I keep the kids on a good sleep schedule through June, July and August?”

Becoming more lax on your kids’ set bedtimes during the holiday break may not feel like a big deal, but — according to Dr. Blake L. Jones,

an assistant professor at Purdue University who researches child health, wellbeing, sleep and bedtime routines — those lost hours of sleep from staying up late on summer nights can have several negative consequences.

## The risks of abandoning your children’s sleep schedules

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Summer is the season of freedom and thus it's easy to understand why kids may want less stringent bedtimes. But while it may take a good deal of discipline to keep kids on a sleep schedule, the positive outcomes of ensuring that they get enough sleep may make it well worth the effort.

“For kids, insufficient sleep has been linked to everything from focus and mood, to cognitive performance, to obesity, and even to injury-related fatalities,” Dr. Jones says. “It affects judgment and behaviors in children, but has also been linked to parental mood.”

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# getting adequate sleep,” Dr. Blake L. Jones writes.

Most parents can easily identify the signs of an impending meltdown from their children: the grumpy face, the whining, the feet dragging and talking back. But what frequently brings on this emotionally fragile state? Dr. Jones has the answer, and — as you may have guessed — it’s simple: a lack of sleep.

“Even though summertime is seen as being carefree and flexible, children tend to do better in their waking hours when they are getting adequate sleep,” he writes.

In fact, there may be no better way to ruin a summer day at the beach than a tired child. While kids may beg and bargain to delay bedtime a little longer each night, they’re not necessarily the best selfregulators. It’s up to the parents to recognize the signs — and implement healthy routines. Plus, why would you want to undo the hard work you put in to establish good routines in the first place?

“We work hard all year to establish healthy and consistent sleep routines for our children and ourselves,” says Dr. Jones. “And then we can lose all of that work and all of those benefits almost instantly when we become lax and allow sleep to be squeezed out of our schedules.”

## The link between summer break, lack of sleep and weight gain

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Late bedtimes and inadequate amounts of sleep have been linked to more than children's behavior — poor sleep has also been increasingly linked to weight gain and obesity — the leading health problem facing American children today. The double whammy here is that studies

also show that children are more likely to gain weight during the summer than at any other time. Why? For one, kids may be snacking more during the course of a day and chances are those include summertime staples like ice cream, hot dogs, pizza and candy. Plus, when school's out, kids generally spend more time being sedentary, as well as increase their screen time (another big factor that adversely affects sleep quality and duration ).

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While the specific mechanisms linking poor sleep habits to weight gain are still being studied, Dr. Jones provides a situation that many parents may be able to relate to:

“Children or adolescents start to stay up late at night watching TV or playing video games after school lets out for the summer. Over time they tend to shorten their overall sleep hours. This puts their bodies into a chronic state of stress because they are not getting the rest/recovery they need in relation to cognitive, metabolic, hormonal, or other physical needs.”

And what happens to children's bodies when they're stressed and tired?

“Insufficient sleep can put the body in a chronic state of stress and need for additional energy,” says Dr. Jones. “The body's

response to this energy shortage is to change hormone levels, sending signals that more energy dense foods are needed (such as sugary and fatty foods).”

## Don't forget about teenagers

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As studies show, most U.S. high school students

meaning that summer is finally the time when teens’ sleep habits match with their schedules. As Dr. Jones notes though, many teens end up staying up much later than they did during the school year, thus breaking the whole model.

don’t get enough sleep,

“If they were already going to bed at midnight and waking up at 6:30 am during the school year (which is leaving them 1.5 2.5 hours short on sleep in the school year), now maybe they are going to bed at 2:30 a.m. and getting up at 9. So they’re sleeping later but still not getting enough sleep.”

# Many teens end up staying up much later than they did during the school year, thus still leaving them sleepdeprived.

The other issue to consider is that while some parents are under the impression that teens should “catch up” on sleep during the summer, that’s not an entirely accurate concept.

“True catchup sleep only works within a very short window of time, such as a day or two,” says Dr. Jones. “So the idea of a teen getting extra sleep in the summer and it making up for insufficient sleep during the long school year is not likely to help in relation to long term health and other outcomes.”

So what is a parent to do? In order to help your kids maintain a good summer sleep schedule, here are the guidelines for the amount of sleep children should get:

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*Courtesy of the National Sleep Foundation*

## Planning ahead for the transition back

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Even though summer break is just beginning and thoughts of backtoschool shopping and new teachers remain largely at bay, these few months somehow always tend to go by too fast. Thus, Dr. Jones encourages parents to be thinking about how to make that transition back to school as natural as possible.

For starters, he notes that if sleep routines aren't completely dismantled during the summer, it will be much easier for children to readjust to the stresses of school later on.

“When those sleep routines are more consistent during the summer, the transition back to school can be easier to the child from the standpoint that they are not going through the additional challenges of tiredness and changes in mood when



transitioning to a new grade, teacher(s), friends and assignments.”

Although some parents may wish to “cheat” the summer sleep schedule by moving back bedtimes to more normal hours as the first day of school approaches, Dr. Jones acknowledges that while this is a good step, “[...] a better step to prevent the large shift in schedules in the first place.”

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