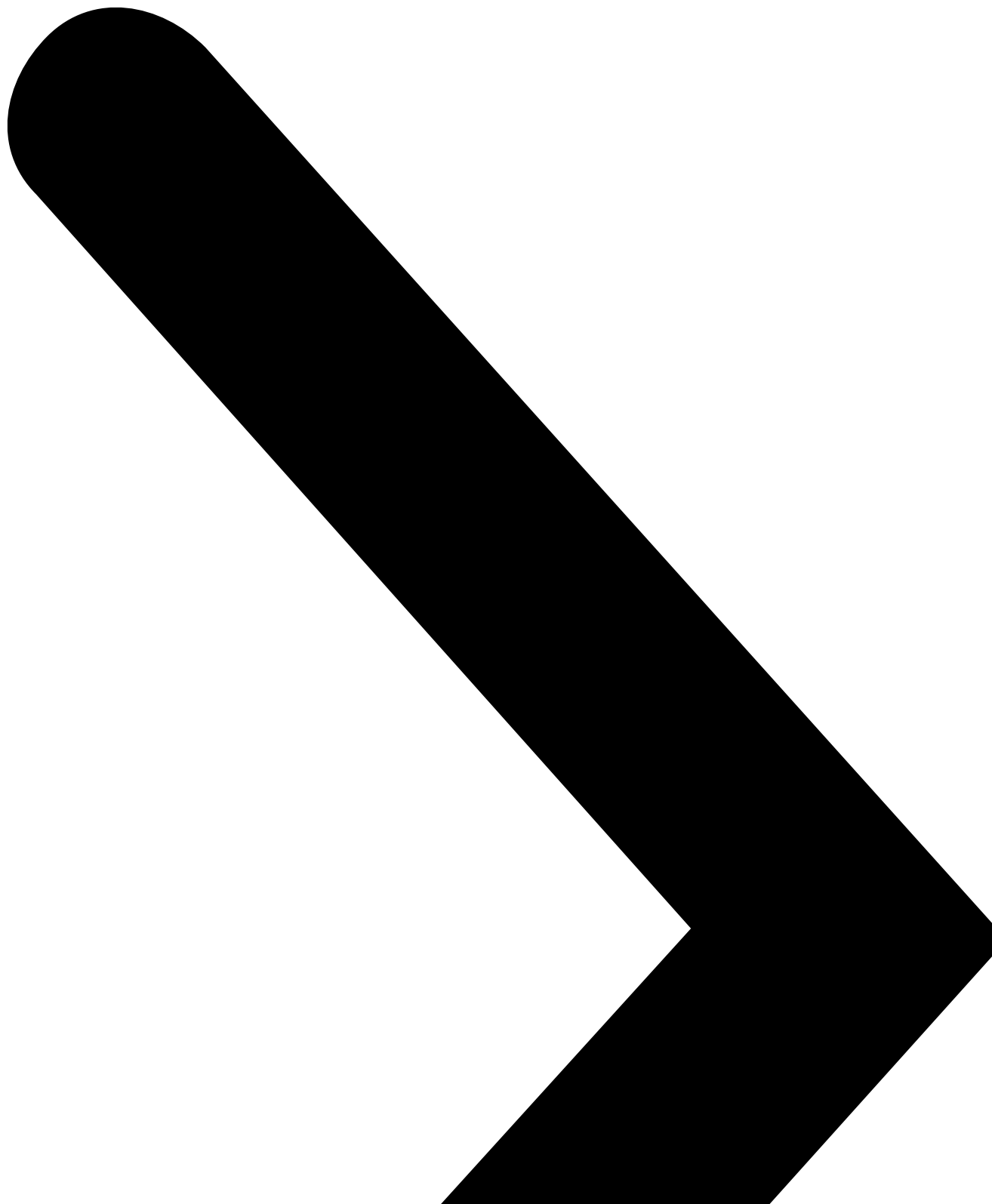


Encouraging Good Sleep Habits

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Sleep / Supporting Healthy Development

Tips for helping kids fall — and stay — asleep

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Oddly, most of our understanding of sleep comes not from knowing what happens when we sleep but from noticing what happens when we *don't*. Sleep is a powerful restorative process. It helps us function better physically, emotionally, and metabolically. It helps us consolidate and form our memories, and has a direct effect on our attention and behavior.

That means, of course, that reduced sleep leads to reduced capacity to do well in school. Kids who don't get enough sleep might even be mistaken for having ADHD. Many of the symptoms are the same—kids running low on sleep are less able to

concentrate, more easily distracted, and more hyperactive or impulsive. And kids of all ages have a harder time learning when they don't get enough sleep, from fussy, overtired infants to high schoolers nodding off in class.

The basics of sleep hygiene

Sleep is essential, but many of us, kids and adults alike, don't get enough of it. One of the best ways to get back on track is through better sleep hygiene. This means establishing habits that promote a good night's sleep, like setting a routine.

Routines look different at different ages. For example, infants aren't born with the same biological clock that keeps us asleep at night and awake during the day. Instead infants will sleep for a few hours and then stay awake for a few hours, regardless of the time of day. This is perfectly normal behavior for a newborn, so parents should let them stick to their natural drowsiness patterns—and try to sleep when they sleep. To avoid having an overtired baby, parents should reinforce the natural sleep schedule by starting a soothing activity after an hour or so of an infant being awake. Parents can also help ease infants into the sleeping patterns you want them to develop by putting them in sunny rooms during the daytime and dark rooms at night. Eventually they'll begin sleeping more at night and napping less and less.

As kids get older, a routine should involve an established bedtime, because they'll often want to stay up watching tv, playing games, or texting. And because it can be hard for kids to fall asleep after all the stimulation they get from doing these things, the bedtime routine should also involve some screen-free time before bed to help them wind down. The goal is for kids to go to bed already feeling drowsy.

Make bedrooms good for sleeping

Another important element of good sleep hygiene is to make the bedroom a good place for sleeping. The room should be dark and not too distracting. Bedrooms often have glowing alarm clocks, flashing lights on game consoles, and phones that vibrate with each new text. Kids' rooms in particular also tend to be filled with fun toys that claim attention.

For the best quality of sleep, bedrooms should be cool and comfortable. This can be a struggle with some kids who prefer falling asleep with the weight of a blanket, but then wake up sweaty and uncomfortable. If this is the case with any of the children in your home, try to use thinner blankets and pajamas.

One last rule is that the bed should only be used for sleeping. Kids, especially teenagers, use their beds for everything, including doing homework and watching television. This is actually bad because kids should only associate their beds with sleep. That way

when they're in bed they know why they're there—and they don't feel like they could be watching TV instead.

Consistency is key

The biggest obstacle to getting kids to sleep is often parental inconsistency. Once you've established a routine, stick to it. You want to be predictable. For example, if it's your routine then your child should know that she's going to take a bath and then she's going to hear a bedtime story, and then it's lights out. Not only is predictability soothing, the built-in warning gives her a chance to get sleepy on her own, before it's abruptly "bedtime."

Sticking to a routine doesn't mean that you can't be flexible. Kids are more likely to cooperate when you have their goodwill, so consider building some flexibility into the schedule. For instance you can let your child know that she can play for fifteen minutes and then let her choose whether she wants to play before her bath or after. Also keep in mind that all kids are different, so the sleep routine that worked for one child might not work for her brother.

The child's bed, not yours

One of the biggest sleep disrupters is the tendency of some children to go into the parents' room in the middle of the night for comfort. Some kids do this very frequently, and it can be hard on the whole family. If your child wakes up in the middle of the night, you should get him back to his bed as soon as possible. Kids like having these late night interactions with parents, but we should do our best to minimize any reward that they might be getting from them. Don't have a long conversation and don't let him climb into bed with you.

For kids who really depend on that comfort and aren't going to fall asleep without it, it's much better for parents to walk kids back to their room and then sit in a chair next to the bed to keep them company until they fall asleep. This can be hard on parents—if your child regularly wakes up you'll want to make sure the chair is comfortable—but kids need to learn that they can sleep on their own.

If your child is having serious trouble falling asleep and consistent sleep hygiene isn't working, it's always a good idea to consult a pediatrician. Sleep medication shouldn't be given to children, but other interventions do work. Kids can learn relaxation and self-soothing techniques that help them fall asleep, and as they get older there are cognitive tools that help, too.