

## Help Teens Get the Sleep they Need

By Patti Teel  
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Teenagers are one of the most sleep deprived segments of the population. Most teens require at least nine hours of sleep but get much, much less. It's a time when school, homework, community service, extracurricular activities, active social lives, and part-time jobs keep them busy from early in the morning until late at night. They are likely to try to make up for a lack of sleep by 'sleeping in' on the weekends. Unfortunately, this contributes to an irregular sleep schedule and actually makes the problem worse, setting them up for a kind of jet lag when Monday morning rolls around.

In addition to having a difficult time turning off the worries of their day, most teens show signs of delayed circadian rhythms—which contributes to their inability to fall asleep until later at night. Since many teens aren't sleepy until around 11 PM, but need to be at school by 7:30 or 8AM, they cannot get an adequate amount of sleep. During puberty, the biological clock in the brain naturally resets to a later time. The pineal gland releases melatonin later at night and this causes teens to fall asleep later. Then, when it's time to get up, a teenager's body clock is likely to still be producing the nighttime hormones. This makes it hard for them to feel active and energetic in the morning.

A growing body of research suggests that starting high school later, more in line with their natural biorhythms, improves attendance, tardiness, achievement and grades. A few years ago in a landmark study, test scores on the SAT college entrance exams in Edina, Minnesota jumped more than 100 points on average, when the morning school bell was delayed for an hour. Unfortunately, most schools are not set up to start later and accommodate teen's sleep needs.

Lack of sleep can be very dangerous for young drivers and it's vitally important to warn teenagers about the dangers of driving while drowsy. Although parents always warn their teens about the dangers of drinking and driving, many of us forget to warn our teens not to drive when they're drowsy, a very real danger today. Drowsiness is the principal factor in about 100,000 car crashes each year, killing adults, teens, and children.

If you feel your teenager has a serious problem falling asleep at night and simply can't get going in the morning, check with your physician. If you choose to consult with a naturopath, he or she may prescribe melatonin supplements and/or light therapy.

Helping our teenagers to get adequate sleep is a daunting task, but there are things that you can do to help:

- Stress the importance of a consistent bedtime
- Help teens to learn relaxation techniques in order to unwind and signal the body that it's time for sleep. Encourage them to practice creative visualization and progressive relaxation techniques. Putting their thoughts and worries in a journal often helps them to put their problems to rest, enabling them to sleep.
- Have them turn off all electronic equipment (including phones) at least an hour before bed.
- Discourage them from drinking caffeinated drinks in the afternoon and evening.
- Encourage regular exercise, especially outside in the morning. (Morning sunshine can help to reset the internal clock.)
- Although teens are likely to sleep in on the weekend, don't let them sleep in for more than a total of two hours over the entire weekend.

## TIME OUT WITH PATTI TEEL

DREAM THE DREAM AND STEP INTO IT

- Simulate the dawn by opening the curtains and turning on the lights an hour before your teen needs to get up.
- And don't forget to warn them about the dangers of driving while drowsy!

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Dubbed "The Dream Maker" by People magazine, Patti Teel is a former teacher and the creator of an award winning relaxation audio series for children. Her book, *The Floppy Sleep Game*, gives parents techniques to help their children relax, deal with stress and fall asleep. She is a popular speaker and presents innovative workshops for parents, children, and health professionals. Get R&R tips and sign up for her newsletter at [www.pattiteel.com](http://www.pattiteel.com). You can listen to her online radio show at [www.timeoutwithpattiteel.com](http://www.timeoutwithpattiteel.com).