

Researchers explore childhood development and sleep patterns

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Be it the stress of poor work-life balance and everyday living or the seemingly endless stream of technological advancement unleashed globally on a daily basis, sleep patterns have become neglected for some and nightmarish for others over the past 20 years. And it's not adults but children that are most likely to be affected.

With a trend toward later bedtimes and shorter sleep duration, a research team from Western is studying the specific neurological functions of sleep in children and the role sleep plays in behaviour and overall wellbeing, particularly in healthy development.

"The more we can encourage the timely treatment of [sleep problems](#) and the safe-guarding of sleep during childhood, the better," said Kathryn Turnbull, a PhD candidate currently collaborating with Graham Reid from Western's Faculty of Social Science, the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry and the Children's Health Research Institute.

Recent studies show behavioral sleep problems are the most common sleep problems in children within the general population. Between 15 and 30 per cent of 2-5-year-old children experience regular difficulties falling asleep or sleeping through the night. Studies show a relationship between parent-reported sleep problems and child psychosocial problems, including attention problems, hyperactivity, oppositional and aggressive behavior, mood problems and anxiety. Poor school functioning and lower cognitive performance have also been associated with sleep problems in children, suggesting that sleep disruptions can impair cognitive processes.

According to Turnbull, childhood behavioral sleep problems are most often identified and treated when a parent finds his or her own sleep or evening activities significantly disrupted. This means that clinical presentation of childhood sleep

problems can depend more on the effect of the child's sleep problems on parents and families, than on the effect of these sleep problems on the child.

Turnbull recently published a review paper in the journal *Sleep* with Reid and Bruce Morton from Western's Department of Psychology calling for more research on how sleep disruption may impact children's developing attention and self-control.

"I hope this research will inform both clinical and research definitions of what constitutes mild versus clinically-significant sleep problem," Turnbull said. "And more importantly, the possible effects that the [sleep](#) problem will have on the child."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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