

# The ABCs of getting 40 winks

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Catching up on sleep you missed during a school night works for some but for others, erratic sleep can cause problems, says Shelly Weiss. Credit: Dan DeLuca via Flickr

How early is too early for school? The American Association of Pediatricians recently recommended middle and high school start times be set no earlier than 8:30 a.m. The organization says the natural sleep cycles of teenagers make it tough for young people to fall asleep before 11 p.m. and difficult for them to "rise and shine" first thing in the morning.

But no matter what time the bell rings at your child's school, there are ways of encouraging [healthy habits](#) to help maximize his or her sleep, says Shelly Weiss, an associate professor in the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine. And the amount of shut-eye a young person needs changes with age, Weiss says.

School-aged children generally need between 10 and 11 hours of shut-eye, says Weiss, while adolescents may need an average of 8.5 to 9.5 hours. But she also says there is no magic number that will be suitable for all kids.

"You might have a child who is a short sleeper, who needs less than the average, but they're doing well during the day. Or you may have a child who is not getting enough sleep for their age, and they're showing signs of sleepiness during the day," says Weiss, who is also a neurologist at The Hospital for Sick Children and the author of the book *Better Sleep for Your Baby and Child*.

Weiss also says that many teenagers don't realize how much sleep they need.

"Often they'll stay up later during the week and try to catch up by sleeping in on the weekends," she says. "For many teenagers and adults, that works fine. But it's when people aren't functioning well during the day that they have to look at their sleep habits and see if that erratic sleep is actually causing problems."

The consequences of not getting enough sleep aren't limited to fatigue. A child who isn't sleeping enough may experience problems with memory or learning, have an inability to pay attention or feel irritable or hyperactive. Lack of sleep can also be associated with [mental health issues](#) such as depression.

But it isn't just a question of how much sleep young people get. Weiss also says it's also a question of how well they are sleeping.

"When children snore, they may have [obstructive sleep apnea](#). If they're not sleeping in the same bedroom through the night, for example if they fall asleep in their parents' room and they're moving rooms back and forth at night, that disrupts the quality of their sleep. So, it's not just the amount of sleep, but whether it is consolidated, good [healthy sleep](#)," she says.

Weiss' tips for encouraging [healthy sleep habits](#) include:

- Setting regular times to go to bed and wake up
- Having some exposure to sunlight in the morning and sleeping in a dark bedroom (a night-light is fine)
- Maintaining a healthy sleep environment (cool, quiet, free of electronics)
- Having a soothing routine to transition from daytime to bedtime
- Eating breakfast at around the same time every morning

For more information about [sleep](#) for children, visit [the Canadian Sleep Society's website](#).

Provided by University of Toronto

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