

Notes on the Importance of Sleep

excerpts from an article titled *The Physiological Basis of Sleep*
by Lisa Gomicko

The young child has as one of its main tasks the development of a healthy body. This is so fundamental that we, as adults, often don't realize its importance and may take it for granted. The fact is, however, that throughout life, every deed, thought, or word spoken is sounded through and limited by the physical body. The capacity of the child to learn in grade school through the awakened cognitive senses, for example, presupposes the well-developed nerve-sense-brain and lower-will senses in early childhood. There is an increasing awareness of the importance of well-developed "lower" senses (touch, life, balance and movement) in order to have a strong foundation for future academic and social success. The early growth years are crucial, and if we look harder at this enormous work of the young human being, we find that the only time that physical growth occurs is during sleep. In addition, sleep is the only time that the body restores and renews its forces from the demands of the day.

Recommended amounts of sleep for the child:

Newborn - 16 hours	6 to 7 years - 11 hours
8 months to 1 year - 15 hours	8 to 9 years - 10-11 hours
1 ½ to 2 years - 14 hours	10 years - 10 hours
4 to 5 years - 12 hours	14 years - 8 hours or more

For young children, these sleep amounts include nap times. Naps allow a child's nervous system much needed rest. Children who do not nap have elevated stress hormones that also cause increased alertness and irritability. The nap should last for at least 30 minutes (an hour is better) and is best spent in a stationary place (not in a car, rocking chair, etc.) Afternoon naps need to end by 2:30 or 3pm. The reason for this is because the liver begins its night restorative phase at that time and sleeping later than 3pm displaces the night-time sleep, causing the child to have difficulty falling asleep by 7 or 8pm.

Interestingly for children, the *more* regular sleep they get, the *easier* it is to fall asleep. "Children who are not over-tired sleep much better and more quietly at night," writes Norbert Glas, M.D. A child of 5 years or more may give up the nap *if* she is regularly going to bed early, by around 7pm, and is not showing signs of sleep deprivation which for children are the opposite of those shown by adults. Instead of yawning and becoming quieter, children become more excitable. Inda Schaenen makes a strong case for a 7:00 bedtime in her book entitled *The 7-O'Clock Bedtime*, saying that once the *parent* determines how much sleep the child needs, this need becomes "non-negotiable." Although some may not sleep, all children including "non-sleepers" benefit from an enforced rest-time. Being able to pause (to be still and quiet) is a skill that eludes even many adults. Children need desperately to learn this. As always, a fair amount of firm inner conviction is required of the adult to secure for the child what he needs.

The body has been described as a temple. In whatever capacity we can manage it, much good can come from our attending to the needs of the child for adequate sleep, warmth, love, healthy food, and age-appropriate activities. This is truly a "gift that keeps on giving".