

Study: Homeschool Students Sleep Better

Research supports later start times for high school

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DENVER, CO — “We have a school system that is set up so that the youngest children, who are awake very early in the morning, start school latest, and our adolescents, who need sleep the most, are being asked to wake up and go to school at a time when their brains should physiologically be asleep,” said [Lisa Meltzer, PhD](#), a sleep psychologist at National Jewish Health in Denver, and lead author of the study.

“Adolescents need nine hours of sleep a night. If –they’re only getting seven hours, on average, by the end of the week they are a full ten hours of sleep behind schedule,” said Meltzer, “and that impacts every aspect of functioning.”

Meltzer and her colleagues charted the sleep patterns of 2,612 students, including more than 400 who are homeschooled. They found that adolescent homeschooled students slept an average of 90 minutes more per night than public and private school students, who were in class an average of 18 minutes before homeschooled children even awoke.

“That cumulative sleep deprivation adds up,” said Meltzer. “The ability to learn, concentrate and pay attention is all diminished when you haven’t had enough sleep. But more than that, a lack of sleep can also impact a teenager’s mood and the ability to drive early in the morning,” she said.

If your teenagers need more sleep, why not just send them to bed earlier? “It’s not that simple,” said Meltzer. Melatonin, the hormone that helps regulate our sleep, shifts by about two hours during puberty. So, even if they wanted to get to sleep earlier, teenagers are battling biological changes in their bodies that are nearly impossible to overcome.

“It’s not that they don’t want to go to bed, but physiologically they simply can’t fall asleep earlier. So, the logical solution is to allow them to sleep later,” said Meltzer.

Fifteen-year-old Caelin Jones couldn’t agree more. Jones, who lives in Denver, says he sets his alarm every morning for 6 a.m. to get to school on time, though he never quite felt fully awake until several hours later.

“Most days I would get to school and pretty much be the same as all the other kids. We were all just bleary-eyed and wondering why we had to be here at this time,” he said.

Jones’ sleep problems became so consuming that he sought sleep counseling through Dr. Meltzer at National Jewish Health. “It’s made a big difference for me,” said Jones, who has learned habits to help him wind down at night.

The study concluded that more than half (55percent) of teens who were homeschooled got the optimal amount of sleep per week, compared to just 24.5 percent of those who attend public and private schools. Conversely, 44.5 percent of public and private school teens got insufficient sleep during the school week, compared to only 16.3 percent of homeschooled teens.

The differences are stark,” said Meltzer. “Across the country, public and private schools that have changed their high school start times see considerable benefits. Students are tardy less often and graduation rates are actually higher,” she said.

While you may not be able to change teenagers’ biology, you can help them develop [healthier sleeping habits](#). Meltzer offers this advice:

- **Get all electronics out of the bedroom.** TVs, computers, video games and phones are major distractions for teens and often delay sleep.
- **Don’t look at any screens 30-60 minutes before bed time.** Though turning off media is as simple as flipping a

switch, the human brain does not work the same way. Being stimulated by media just before bed can make the brain too active to sleep.

- **Set up family charging stations** where mom, dad and the kids plug in their phones at night so they are out of reach.
- **Most importantly, set a consistent routine.** Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends. This one habit can help regulate your body's internal clock and improve the quality of sleep you get.

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Media Contacts

Our team is available to arrange interviews, discuss events and story ideas.

Jessica Berry

303.398.1082

berryj@njhealth.org