

Adolescents, Sleep, and Advice for Parents and Students

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It is 3:30 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon as I sit at my desk at school to begin writing the article you are about to read. I am pleased to report that I am wide-awake, alert, and making good progress on the article. And... I know one reason why all of this is true — a good night's sleep last night.

I know how much sleep I need per night. Seven hours is adequate for me, 7.5 is better, 8 would be ideal. I also know what tends to happen when I fall short of my needed rest – maybe a little drowsiness in the late afternoon, a few more careless errors when I try to prepare my math lesson for class the next day, some difficulty focusing all my attention on problems or issues that need to be addressed at school.

For the last few years, our knowledge about how the human brain functions has literally exploded. More specifically, we know that the brain is still growing and evolving throughout adolescence and that adequate sleep is one the keys to that growth and evolution. Researchers now tell us that adolescents need at least 8 hours of sleep per night. Most suggest that 8.5 or 9 hours of sleep is necessary – not only to aid in brain development, but also to ensure that adolescents are functioning well throughout the day. I wonder how many of our students in the Upper School are falling short of the recommended time needed for sleep. Here are three suggestions that I believe are worth considering.

#1 Schedule time for sleep in the same way time is scheduled for homework, sporting events, rehearsals, commuting to school, and any other important obligation. Too often, students allow sleep to fall to the bottom of their list of priorities because they are so heavily scheduled with other activities and responsibilities.

#2 Consistency is important. Two consecutive nights of sleeping for eight hours allows for better functioning than six hours of sleep one night, followed by ten hours the next night. Students who try to function with too little sleep during the week, hoping to “catch up” on the weekend, have established a pattern that is far less productive in the long run than one that is more consistent on a daily basis.

#3 Disconnect from the world. Some distractions and interruptions that interfere with sleep are unavoidable. Others, such as on-line activities and texting friends, are completely within the control of every student. Leaving the cell phone on the kitchen table before going to bed might be a good start. Students simply have to be willing to shut down their connections with the world in favor of what we all know is much needed rest.

As the end of the semester approaches and students are preparing for their final exams, I will discuss with the students in my class how best to prepare for those exams. Not only will we review important concepts we have studied this semester, but I will talk with them about eating well, staying healthy, and getting the proper amount of sleep. It is my hope that similar discussions will take place in your home.