

# SLEEP

HOW TO MAKE SURE YOUR KIDS  
**GET THE SLEEP THEY NEED**  
FOR GOOD HEALTH, WELLBEING AND LEARNING



# INTRODUCTION

## Parentingideas journalist Karen Fontaine recently wrote of sleep:

"Whoever coined the term 'sleeping like a baby' had obviously never lived with one. Infants' sleep patterns are notoriously erratic, and as they grow up the story remains much the same. Preschoolers kick up about napping during the day, school-aged children want to stay up late at night and teenagers refuse to get out of bed in the morning.

One thing remains the same: sleep is critically important for children, but Australians are getting about half-an-hour less sleep per night than they did 30 years ago, according to a study by the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.

Kids are going to bed later because it's now the norm for both parents to work full time, meaning that evenings are often the only opportunity for family time. In addition, the intrusion into bedrooms of digital media such as mobile phones, laptops and iPods means children are getting less shut-eye – with far-reaching consequences.

"With disturbed sleep, you pretty well see changes in everything, from the cardiovascular system through to the skin," says Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research. "You can go without food for a week or so but you cannot go without sleep."

As Dr Lushington says, sleep is important for memory, "so if you want to remember things and to forget things – which are equally important – you have to sleep".

"We also know from animal studies that the sleep state seems to be incredibly important for optimal wiring up of the brain," he says. "In infants and kids, sleep plays an important role in the optimal development of the brain. Sleep is also important for growth, and for those who don't get enough there is a failure to thrive. Sleep plays an important role in the immune system and it also anchors the circadian body clock system."

There is no such thing as a sleep bank – meaning that even if a child had 12 hours sleep last night, they won't get away with just eight hours tonight. Parents need to stick to a routine, make evenings as predictable as possible, and enforce hard-and-fast rules, particularly for teenagers, about digital media in the bedroom.

Thanks Karen for some great research.

At Parentingideas we recognise that sleep maximises the brain growth that occurs in both toddlers and teenagers. Sleep also consolidates learning. Sleep research has shown that the brain practises what it has learned during the day when a young person is asleep. So sufficient sleep consolidates past learning as well as keeping a young person fresh to maximise their future learning.

Sleep experts stress that while adults may not have control over biology we can assist children and teens to establish good sleep patterns. It has been noted that children who develop good sleep patterns tend to carry these into adolescence. If you are the parent of young children and find yourself struggling to get them to sleep, or you are regularly battling kids who want to stay up longer, then some knowledge of good sleep habits maybe useful.

Many children are sleep deprived right now; lack of sleep is an underrated problem. We've put together this guide to help you understand the importance to sleep, learn the basics of good sleep hygiene and develop a range of behavioural strategies to make sure your kids regularly get a good night's sleep.

Let's get started.

# 1 HOW MUCH SLEEP DO MY KIDS NEED?

Sleep varies from child to child but the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research recommends the following

2 TO 5-YEAR-OLDS	11-12 HOURS PER NIGHT
6 TO 12-YEAR-OLDS	9-11 HOURS PER NIGHT
TEENAGERS	8-10 HOURS PER NIGHT



## AS A GENERAL RULE

Stick to the recommended guidelines but be alert to your own child's particular sleep requirements.

**"Being young and healthy, teenagers can sometimes stay up all night and seem fine the next day. What you can do is help them see the connection between how they're sleeping – and how they feel during the day." Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.**



## 2 REGULARITY IS THE KEY

Regularity is the key sleep factor that helps kids perform better, cope with adversity and behave better at school.

Kids who go to bed at varying times and wake up at varying times – with extra big swings on weekends compared to weekdays – tend to suffer adverse effects.

### **Rigorous habits are important when it comes to sleep.**

Kids are routine junkies. They fight routines of all kinds, but routines are actually good for them.

Good routines (e.g. with meal times, bath time, homework time, bedtime and wake-up time) are essential to a child's healthy development.

On the other hand, kids in chaotic homes use a lot of their brain power just working out what comes next. The load on their brain (the load associated with reacting to stress) is too much for many.

Routine and regularity in sleep is similarly important. **The sleep clock thrives on regularity.** The sleep clock is re-adjusted on holidays and takes some time to get back to normal when kids return to school.



### AS A GENERAL RULE

Vary sleep times by no more than an hour on weekends and holidays.



### 3 DEVELOP A SLEEP ROUTINE

Establish a 30-minute bedtime routine that signals the end of the day. A known routine such as quiet time, drink, toilet and story lets young children know what is expected of them and enables them to plan accordingly. Older children can adopt their own routine, but the ritual of a routine prepares young people of all ages for bed in a psychological and physical sense.

### 3 DECIDE ON A BEDTIME WITH YOUR CHILD THEN STICK TO IT

There are no hard and fast rules about appropriate bedtimes for children. However the time you choose should suit both parent and child. Discuss appropriate bedtimes with your children. Some youngsters fail to see that sleep is a biological need. They see it as something imposed on them by parents. I am constantly amazed how reasonable children can be when they have had the chance to participate in the decision-making process.



## 5 REDUCE OVER-STIMULATION

In preparation for bed, ensure your child is engaged in passive activities such as reading, relaxing or bathing. That means no caffeine in the evening, and turning off all screens at least 30 minutes before bedtime.

## 6 TEMPORARILY REMOVE DISTRACTIONS AT BEDTIME FOR BEDTIME RESISTERS

Young children and children in the early primary school years frequently will push the boundaries at bedtime. They like to stay up and spend more time in the adult world particularly when television and other forms of technology are pleasant distractions. So check out any distractions such as television that prompt your child to procrastinate or resist your best attempt to get him or her to bed and remove them...even if it's just a temporary measure. Make the adult world boring around bedtime and children are less likely to want to stay up.

**"Keep track of how your kids are during the day. If they look like they're not coping or if they're irritable, it might be that they need more sleep." Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.**



## 7 WHAT TO DO WITH PROCRASTINATORS?

If you have a procrastinator who will find anything to do other than get into bed, focus on your behaviour, not theirs. I know a parent who begins reading a bedtime story whether her child is in bed or not. As her daughter treasures her story, this is generally enough to have her rushing to the bedroom. Bedtime is the time for parents to be firm and active; it's not a time for wishy-washiness and passivity.



### AS A GENERAL RULE

Have a bed plan and stick to it. Calmness and determination will win the day with procrastinators.

**"Give them time to unwind before they turn out the lights and don't let them fall asleep in front of the TV. There has to be a routine for falling asleep – otherwise what happens is that unless the light or the TV is on, kids can't fall asleep – which is crazy." Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.**



## 8 DISTINGUISH BETWEEN 'BEING IN BED' AND 'BEING IN THE BEDROOM'

Children differ in the amount of sleep they need. It may be more realistic to expect some kids to be in their bedrooms at a set time, rather than in bed. Once away from the adult world children generally fall asleep fairly quickly. Young children may remain on their beds surrounded by a favourite toy or books to keep them occupied before they fall asleep.

This bedtime approach has the added advantage that it gives parents some free time away from their children. This is important for your own wellbeing and, if a partner is present, partner time.

## 9 RESIST CHILDREN'S EFFORTS TO INVOLVE YOU

Steadfastly ignore calls for drinks or assistance with forgotten homework at bedtime. Once your child is in bed, ignore their calling out for 'one more story', a drink or a toilet stop. Demonstrate that you are unwilling to play their 'keep you busy with them' games. Impress upon children that night time is your time and as such is extremely precious. Short of a nightmare or an earthquake, you do not wish to be disturbed by them. If they have difficulty getting to sleep or waking up then it is their job to put themselves back to sleep or occupy themselves until they fall asleep.



## 10 RETURN BOOMERANGS TO THEIR ROOMS AND GIVE THEM MINIMUM ATTENTION

Many young children like to get up after they've gone to bed and join in the adult world. However, after the quiet bedtime routine has set the scene for sleep, you should resist calls for 'one more thing' and quietly return 'boomerangs' straight to their room.

After that, resist calls for a drink, one more book or other attempts to involve you. If they return again, give them minimum attention and turn them back towards the bedroom again immediately.

Alternatively, consider removing the reason for them staying up in the first place and go to bed yourself.

**"On the weekends, don't let kids stay up more than an hour or two later than they normally do, and don't let them sleep in more than an hour or two later than normal." Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.**



## 11 AVOID SITTING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

This may be all right once in a while or for emergencies, but habits are easily formed and often difficult to break. Many parents who sit with young children until they drop off discover that they have made a rod for their own backs.

## 12 MAKE SURE YOU WAKE YOUR CHILD AT THE SAME TIME EACH MORNING

If you overcompensate and allow your child to sleep later to make up for lost sleep after a late night, you are encouraging a late-sleep pattern. That is, the sleep clock likes regularity and routine. If 7:00 am is your child's usual wake-up time then stick to it even though your child may have slept poorly the night before. If you allow your child to sleep until, say 9:00 am, to compensate for lack of sleep then he is less likely to be tired at the usual bed-time the next night. It will take him longer to fall asleep and if you allow him to sleep in longer again to compensate gradually his clock to change to a new pattern. It's better for a child have one poor night's sleep than to have his sleep clock go out of kilter because his routines are constantly being disrupted.



### AS A GENERAL RULE

Vary wake-up times by no more than an hour during the weekends or the holidays to minimise interference with children's sleep clocks.



## 13 MANAGE NIGHT TERRORS

Children in the 2 to 5 age group commonly experience night terrors and/or nightmares that are scary enough to wake them up. This accompanies the more imaginative stage of early childhood.

### IF YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCES NIGHTMARES OR WAKES UP FRIGHTENED

- ▶ explain what has happened
- ▶ reassure them with your physical presence and a kiss and cuddle
- ▶ return them to their bed
- ▶ let them know that their imaginations are active and that nothing will hurt them.

Consider using a night-light if your child continues to be scared of the dark.

## 14 COPING WITH BEDWETTING

Approximately 20 per cent of five-year-olds wet their beds, while around 5 per cent of 10-year-olds still do so. A child who wets their bed is often a heavy sleeper who simply doesn't wake when they need to go to the toilet, while their bladder doesn't stretch enough yet to hold their urine. Some children produce more urine at night than others. Bedwetting is generally something that children grow out of, but check with your child's doctor if you are concerned about it.



## 15 DEALING WITH VISITORS IN THE NIGHT

It is not uncommon for a child in the younger age group to wake up in the middle of the night and come to their parent's bed for comfort. Encourage your child to go back to sleep without coming to your bed. Discuss ways your child can go back to sleep when they wake up, without having to get out of bed. Kids often need to experience comfort and security when they wake in the night, but you need a good night's sleep yourself. One approach to try might be to offer your child to sleep on a mattress or a couch close to your bedroom for a night or two, on the proviso that they stay in bed if they wake up in the night.

## 16 DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE VALUE OF A GREAT PILLOW

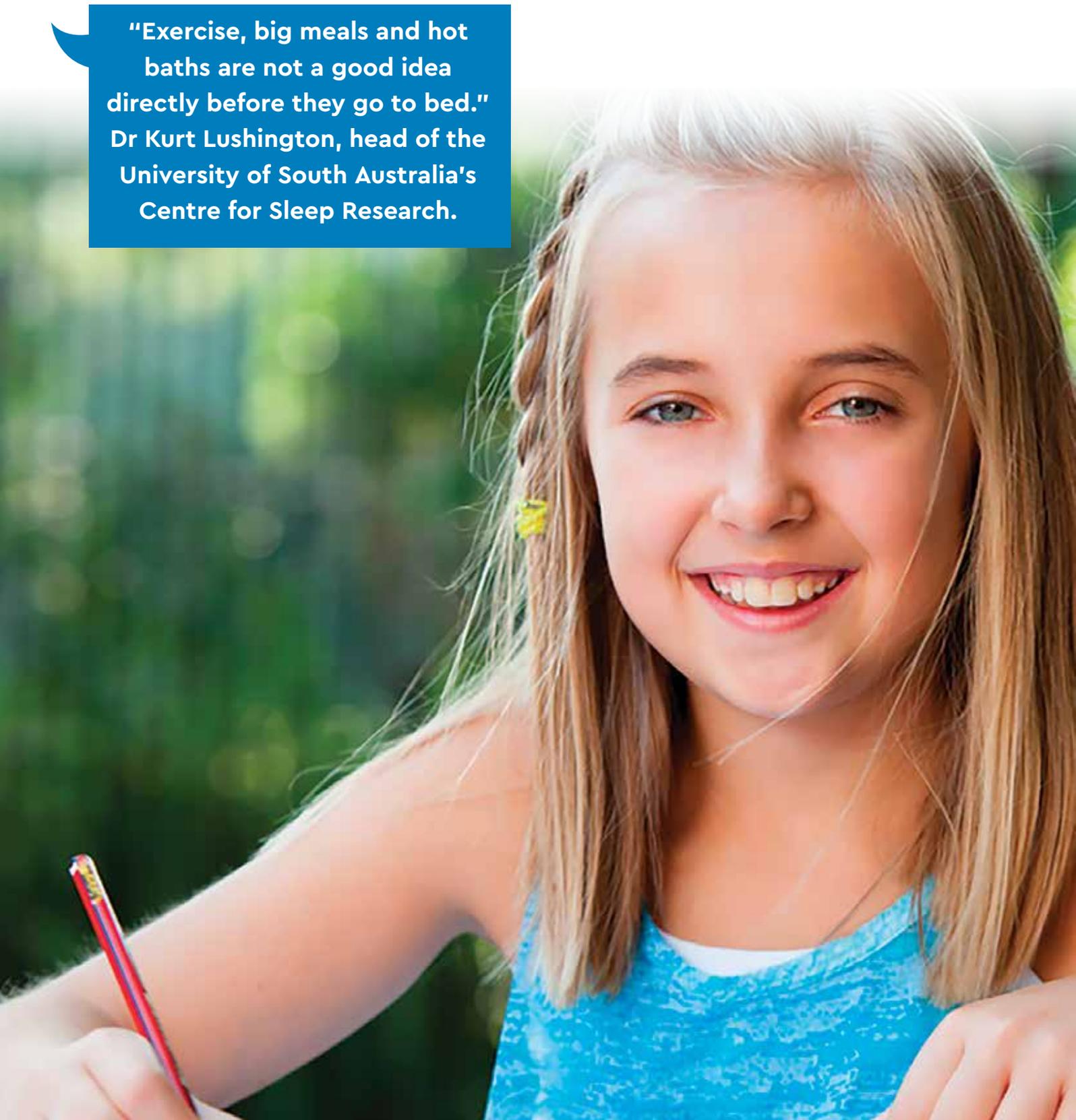
In all the talk of sleep habits and the like we often forget the value of a pillow. Not only is a comfortable pillow an asset but also the familiarity of a pillow is a fabulous aid for sleep. Kids should take their own pillow to school camps and sleepovers if they are to have a good night's sleep.



## 17 KEEP BEDS FOR SLEEPING, NOT WORKING

Discourage children from doing homework in or on their bed. If they do, they'll start to associate bed with work. Keep beds for sleeping and reading and don't contaminate the bed with work. This strategy by itself will make a massive difference to your child's sleep patterns.

**"Exercise, big meals and hot baths are not a good idea directly before they go to bed."  
Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the  
University of South Australia's  
Centre for Sleep Research.**



## 18 ESTABLISH GOOD SLEEP PATTERNS IN TEENAGERS

The sleep-wake cycle for teenagers is delayed by up to two hours. That is, they are sleepy later and awake later than when they were younger.

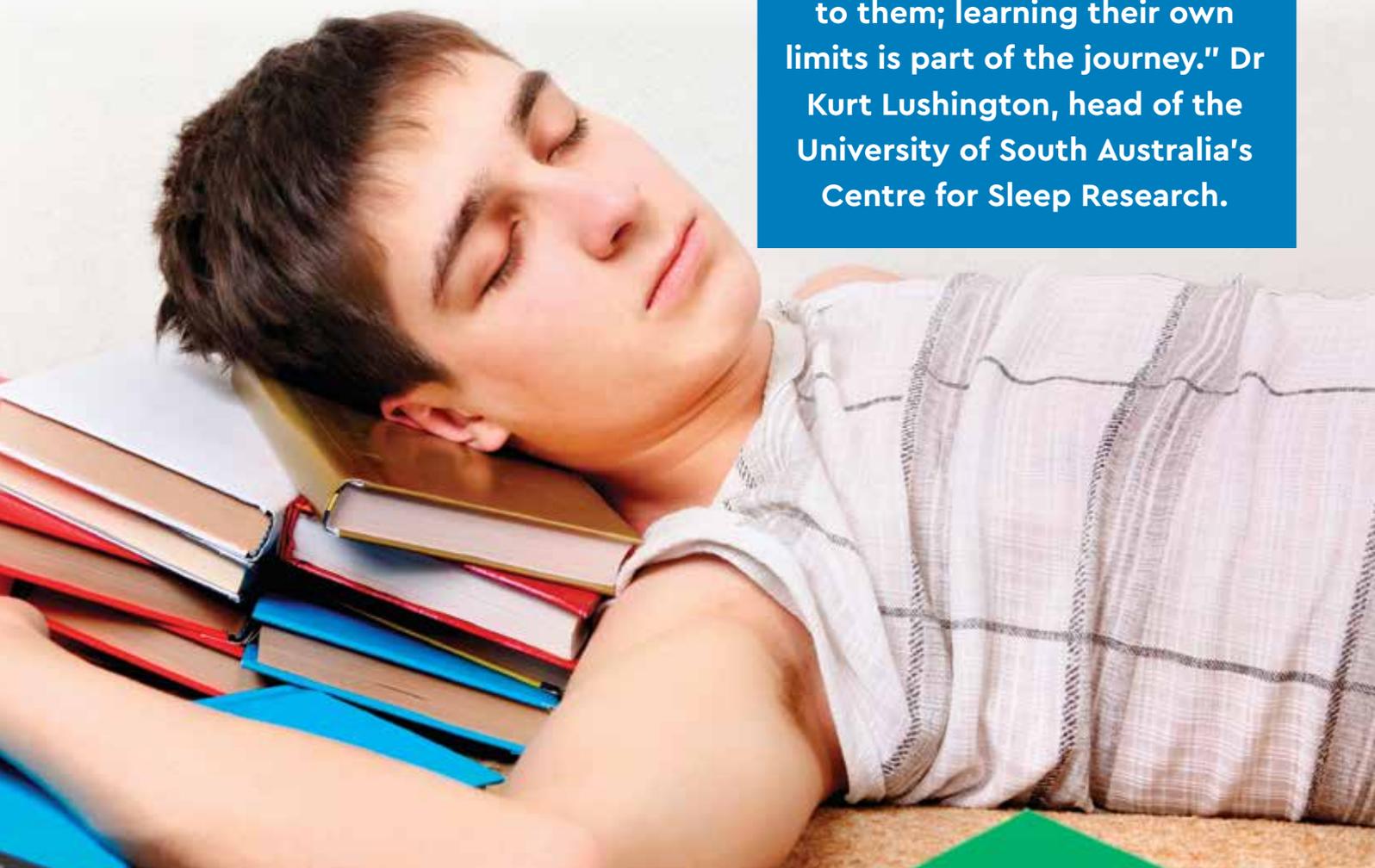
Most teens don't secrete melatonin, which makes them sleepy, until around 11 pm, which makes the time before then a sleepless zone. Young children secrete melatonin far earlier than this.

On the other hand, cortisol, the chemical that wakes them up, is secreted at 8.15 am for many teenagers. It seems the teen brain naturally wants to remain asleep just when most have to wake up.

One US study found that 20 per cent of teenagers were asleep in class in the morning, which had catastrophic effects on their learning. As a result, a number of high schools have altered their timetables, delaying the start of school time to better accommodate this naturally later teen sleep-wake cycle. This not only enables teens to get more sleep but also to be at their best (or at least awake) when they are at school.

The results of this change in the schools that tried it were startling and immediate. They included better learning, better behaviour, less fights and fewer kids dropping out of school.

**"The teen years are a period of life where it's to be expected that you will hand over control to them; learning their own limits is part of the journey." Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.**



Unfortunately very few schools are willing or able to shift their timetable in this way, despite the clear benefits. Nevertheless, there are some things you can do to encourage good sleep habits in your teenager:

- 1 REGULAR BEDTIMES** Kids may fight this, but be regular during the week and let kids stay up a little later on weekends.
- 2 HAVE A WIND-DOWN TIME** of up to 45 minutes prior to bed. This includes no television or other 'digital' stimuli, generally calming down and limiting food and caffeine intake.
- 3 MAINTAIN A BEDTIME ROUTINE** not dissimilar to when they were younger, such as teeth cleaning followed by reading time. Just as it did before, this helps provide a psychological signal that it is time for sleep."
- 4 KEEP BEDROOMS FOR SLEEP** and not for TV or Facebook. Bedrooms that resemble caves seem to be recommended.
- 5 MAXIMISE THE THREE SLEEP CUES** darkness (cave-like bedroom), lowering body temperature (baths can be good for this) and melatonin (work within their cycle).

#### SLEEP TIPS FOR TEENS

- 1** Make sure your young person gets sufficient sleep but be aware that this may mean altering bedtimes and rising times if possible.
- 2** Allow them to catch up on lost sleep during the weekend but make sure they don't oversleep as this plays havoc with their sleep clock.
- 3** Ban mobile phones and other communication technology after 930 at night.
- 4** Be prepared to talk to your teenagers at night when they are alert.

