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Why Are We Depriving Our Teens of Sleep?

Later start times would improve school performance, so why can't we make the switch?

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACristakis | Nov. 18, 2011

Daylight is at a premium these days, and if your family is anything like ours, your teenagers are having a hard time getting out of bed in the morning. “Delayed sleep phase” is what affects them: the maddening shift in circadian rhythms that causes adolescents to fall asleep and awake at ever-later hours. Adolescents need an average of 9.25 hours of sleep per night to support their developing brains, which are exploding at a rate akin to infancy. But we treat access to sleep as if it were an illegal drug, commonly requiring teens to start school at 7:00 a.m. or earlier.



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This puts students at a serious disadvantage. Numerous studies show that later start times are associated with lower rates of obesity, [fewer car accidents](#) and lower drop-out rates, as well as [improved academic performance](#). In one study, shifting the start time from 7:20 to 8:40 a.m. significantly [reduced depression](#) as well. (Indeed, one has to wonder why we offer standardized tests like the SAT at 8:00 am; average scores would probably rise 15 points if we just switched to offering tests at noon.) A few districts have shifted start times successfully, so why hasn't the practice been adopted more widely despite overwhelming scientific evidence?

There are all sort of logistical excuses: delaying start times means parents might not be able to get to work as early; bus schedules would have to be shifted; a later school day would interfere with sports games and practices; teenagers would get home from school later, which would reduce family time.

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But our inability to change start times is also illustrative of a larger pattern of neglecting the wellbeing and potential of our young people. We know, for example, that playtime and music increase cognitive development; yet school systems nationwide have dramatically slashed budgets for those critical activities. We know that children are sickened by junk food; yet we peddle unhealthy snacks in school cafeterias — and Congress just voted down proposed changes to the school lunch program that would require including fruits and green vegetables. (Currently, pizza sauce and French fries are deemed equivalent to other vegetables.) We know that American teachers are poorly paid and supervised compared to teachers in many other countries (including rich and poor ones); yet [teacher-blaming](#) is a favorite pastime.

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On the sleep issue, like so many things related to children, adults often assume that there are impossible tradeoffs: if we “coddle” students by giving them adequate sleep, they might lose their competitive edge. Perhaps this is why, when an online petition was recently launched on the White House website requesting federal action to delay start times for teenagers, it didn’t meet the threshold of 5,000 signatures to merit an official response.

Making the switch would require collective action: we’d all have to make the switch together. Until the late 1960’s, the people of Sweden all drove on the left side of the road, like they do in England today. Then, one day, overnight, all the road signs in Sweden were changed, and everyone — together — started driving on the right side of the road. There were very few accidents and many benefits. Any major change in the social status quo is hard, but it is not impossible, and it often needs to be dramatic.



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