

BY SUSAN BELKNAPP



Sweet dreams

Creating a routine can benefit your child for life.

Sleep. We all need it, and it seems that those who need it most – kids of all ages – tend to fight against it the hardest. There are a lot of tips about how to establish sleep patterns for your newborn and infant, and even your toddler has nap schedules. But what about after your kids are older?

"All children need good sleep patterns," says Vonda Dennis, the Baby Guru, a nationally renowned child-development expert based in Los Angeles. "When children sleep, they are developing their brains, and the brain is a work in progress until age 21."

Dennis, a certified parenting coach and baby sleep trainer, has more than 20 years of experience as a baby nurse,

postpartum doula, labor assistant, lactation specialist and educator. She coaches and assists parents from throughout the nation on multiple levels of childhood development (thebabyguru.com).

"When children are not sleeping properly, it can affect all phases of development, particularly the ability to learn and process information," says Dennis. "Where this becomes crucial is in young children, particularly those with special needs."

It is not uncommon for children with ADHD or autism to have impeded sleep patterns, and the lack of sleep exponentially compounds their unwanted behaviors.

"Sleep deprivation can cause

the issues a special needs child is experiencing to increase by the 25th power," says Dennis. "It's a vicious circle: They can't sleep because of their issues, and lack of sleep exacerbates those issues further."

This can manifest as increased anxiety and sensory sensitivity in autistic children and the distracted irritability of those with ADHD.

"When children pass the point on their sleep cycle when they should be sleeping – nap time, for instance – and they're not, the hormone cortisol is released, which works like adrenaline," says Dennis. "They get wound up, and they have no cognitive reasoning at this point."

Every parent has at one time

GOOD HABITS

Set your body to sleep

Make sure your child's nap and evening routines are consistent and involve a series of rituals, which help calm him down. Be aware of the effect that light, and other stimuli, have on him.

The entire family should dial down the noise when preparing for bedtime. Most routines involve bath time, story time and then sleep.

The sleeping area needs to be prepared. A dark, cool (but not cold) environment is most beneficial for programming you or your child's body clocks. If your child is afraid of the dark, allow for a very soft night-light, but not one that's likely to stimulate his brain into non-sleep mode.

WIN a sleep time gift basket

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Child

or another had to deal with an overly tired child; she gets cranky and erratic, but by the time her body has begun releasing cortisol, there is no going back. She's too hyped up by that point to sleep.

"The key is to instill consistent sleep patterns early and make sure your children stick to them," says Jill Golden, spokesperson for Lightcatcher, a line of curtains created by Beacon Rooms. "Lightcatcher curtains not only block light, they insulate temperature and noise."

Blackout curtains such as Lightcatcher let children nap, sleep later in the mornings and signal their bodies for sleep at night.

"This can be particularly beneficial to children who are hypersensitive to their environments," says Golden. "Part of training them for sleep cycles is being aware of what disrupts them."

Dennis agrees and states that once you have instilled a proper sleep cycle in your child, she will be able to fall asleep anywhere.

"Once they are conditioned, children will be able to follow their bodies' clues and sleep at a rock concert, if properly programmed," says Dennis. "The key is being consistent with your conditioning."

According to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), sleep is the primary activity of the brain during the development of every living creature. Circadian rhythms (the sleep-wake cycle) are usually regulated by light and dark.

It takes time to develop



these cycles, which is why newborns and infants sleep around the clock – or don't, in some cases.

If, by the time your child has passed infancy and she is still not on a proper sleep schedule, you may find that she is prone to tantrums and other behavior issues. Or she may have special needs, which makes it all the more imperative to get her on a proper sleep routine.

This does not only mean getting enough sleep; it means she should be getting the proper kind of sleep. Rapid Eye Movement (REM) is "active" sleep, and non-Rapid Eye Movement (nREM) is "quiet" or deep sleep. These two phases alternate continuously while we are sleeping.

"You must control the stimuli in your child's environment," says Dennis. "When it's time to wind down for the night, it pays to develop a routine that prepares the body for sleep – and stick to it. You can't give your child a bath and then let her watch a stimulating TV show – her brain and body will get mixed signals."