

Bedtime Was Hard Enough. Then Came Quarantine.

Kids across the world are having trouble sleeping. There are ways to help.

By Craig Canapari, M.D., New York Times, April 14, 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/parenting/coronavirus-kids-sleep.html?smid=em-share>



I've noticed a trend in my sleep clinics over the last several weeks. Children who had previously been napping and sleeping through the night are suddenly having problems sleeping, and so are their parents. But it's not just the sleep patients; I split my time between treating children with pulmonary and sleep issues, and lately everyone seems to be having sleep complaints.

Pediatricians in Italy have seen [widespread sleep disturbances](#), among other problems, in children during the pandemic. I wondered what sort of sleep problems our lockdowns were generating and wanted to try to help tired parents if I could. There aren't many U.S. pediatric sleep doctors, and parents wait up to six months to see physicians in my clinic, so I took to social media and email to contact my network of parents and ask if their children's sleep had suffered. I received more than 300 responses in one day and noticed several recurring themes.

One common issue is that children are shifting their sleep schedule later, resulting in stressed parents and children. On the other hand, Laura Jean Miller, a psychiatrist in Atlanta, wrote that her teenage patients are sleeping later but feeling well rested.

Getting up late isn't necessarily bad, especially for teenagers. However, when young children stay up late, they can push into the only downtime left to stressed parents. Some research also suggests that later bedtimes are tied to lower long-term cognitive performance in young kids. A British team [looked at 10,000 7-year-olds](#) and found bedtimes consistently later than 9 p.m. in early childhood were associated with difficulty in reading and math in elementary school. If your child's schedule is drifting later, keep the shift to one hour, or two for teenagers.

Longer sleep-related shifts will be harder to unwind when this is all over. Stop screen time 30 to 60 minutes before bedtime, since intense, close-up light exposure in the evening will push sleep later by [suppressing the secretion of melatonin, a sleep hormone](#). Likewise, don't close your child's shades, since natural morning light may help wake her up. Take a walk or play outside first thing to start the day with sunlight that will help her circadian rhythm.

Of course, if the schedule change is working for you, it's OK to lean into it, temporarily. One mother told me her toddler's sleep schedule moved two hours later, shifting from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., so now she's waking up at 9 a.m. instead of two hours earlier. Now she and her partner let their daughter sleep in each morning so they can work.

Many parents said they are seeing more conflicts around bedtime or naps. Although many working parents now spend all day with their children, that doesn't mean they are getting as much quality time with them. As we bounce between conference calls, keep up with virtual schooling, prepare food and keep the house going, children can feel neglected and needier than ever at bedtime, so they push back.

"They almost seem more starved for my attention," wrote Lauren Assalley, a school psychologist from Taylorville, Ill., with two young children. Her husband works as a funeral director and has been out of the home for long days during the epidemic.

A kid who refuses to nap poses a tough obstacle for parents trying to work remotely. If your child is demanding more attention at nap time and bedtime, try to carve out more quality time with him during the day, difficult as it may be. Take breaks where you focus entirely on your child, even for 10 or 15 minutes, which may reduce your child's neediness.

[Now is a great time to help your child learn [to play independently](#).]

Also, make sure that your evenings are relaxed. Some families have discovered leisurely evenings to be an unexpected benefit of social distancing. "We're actually finding bedtime to be so much more pleasant, and earlier, than when we're both working all day," wrote Lauren Hansen, of Westchester, N.Y. If your child is older than 2 and refuses to nap, it's OK to enforce 30 minutes of quiet downtime, even if you have to resort to giving them a screen.

[How to and when to get [toddlers to nap](#)]

Many parents complained that their kids are waking up in the middle of the night and visiting a parent's bed more than before. This can be a sign that your child is feeling anxious or is struggling to process stress. Katherine Benvenuti, a pastry chef in Portland, Ore., opened a bakery and restaurant, named Bar King, the week that Oregon restaurants [were closed down](#). Her 3-year-old started waking up at night for two to three hours at a stretch. She and her husband stopped talking about coronavirus around him, which has made a big difference.

“He’s not waking up anymore and he’s falling asleep more easily,” Benvenuti wrote in an email. “It’s hard to remember that, even when my children are quietly playing by themselves in the living room, they are absorbing all of what my husband and I are saying.”

Watching the news can be stressful for some children. Children also may be [grieving missed birthday parties, school plays or athletic events](#). Acknowledge these losses and try to find alternatives. If your child is sad about not being able to have a birthday party, arrange a surprise Zoom call with family and friends.

[How to [help your anxious child](#) during the pandemic.]

Physical activity, especially outdoors, seems to help with all of these issues. Krystal Watson, a mother in Montana, said: “We have a daily routine that includes going outside as much as possible, and this makes a huge difference.” When they don’t exercise, she wrote, there are “restless nights.” I’ve seen this in my practice as well. Tire your kids out. Play tag. Go for a long walk. Have a dance party with your family. This will help everyone sleep better.

But there’s only so much you can do, and not every sleep issue has a simple solution. Or you may not have the bandwidth for any of this, and that’s OK. Sometimes you just need to survive. One mother in Buffalo, N.Y., whose husband is self-quarantining in the basement after a coronavirus exposure, told me she was breaking all the rules and letting her kids watch television before bed, sleep in her room and stay up late, which fixed their sleep problems.

She knows she is developing habits she will need to address when this is all over. But give yourself a break if it helps your child, and you, sleep better at night.