

Napping in Children: Developmental, Parental and Caregiver Perspectives

Jason T. Ramsay, M.A., PhD & Spyros Volonakis, M.Ed

*Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care...
Chief nourisher in life's feast.*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Introduction

Many of us remember napping as children. For some it was a welcome repose, for others, a sentence of an hour's boredom. The act of napping in general has recently garnered the public's attention. Napping is a cultural institution in many parts of Europe and Latin America. Napping has become a topic of debate among the childcare community. Should childcare sites, either daycare or homecare provide a nap period for preschool to early school aged children? In an attempt to provide an informed answer to this question, three perspectives will be presented: neurodevelopmental, parental and caregiver. A balanced approach to meeting the needs of the developing brain and parental concerns about promoting normal sleep rhythms will be discussed. A brief practical guide to promoting nap and restful periods is provided along with a list of sleep resources.

Sleep, Napping and the Developing Child

Sleep is very important to the developing brain. At the toddler and preschooler stages, the brain undergoes major reorganizations at the level of nerve groups. This change includes a neurophysiological process called pruning, during which the brain significantly reduces the number of connections for each nerve cell (Kolb & Wishaw, 2008). The developing brain loses many connections, while strengthening others. The theory is that pruning reduces redundancy in the brain and forges pathways and routes

that optimize perceptual processes, memory, and learning. Research has shown that sleep is an important component of these neural processes.

Researchers have discovered that sleep in infants is important for the promotion of secure emotional attachments with their parents (McNamara, Andresen, Clark, Zborowski & Duffy, 2001). Research has shown that children who are chronically under-rested are more at risk for the development of behavioural problems than their rested peers (Lavigne et al, 1999). A recent study conducted at the Universities of Montreal and Minnesota found that the amount and quality of sleep that children get at night in the first two years of life is directly related to their ability to develop self regulation skills during the first two years of life (Bernier et al., 2010). On the flip side, infant sleep difficulties predict sleep difficulties, marital discord, negative mood and stress in parents (Metzler and Midell, 2007)

Napping during the day: Caregiver Perspectives

Children require more sleep than adults. Babies sleep the most, but school aged children still require 10 hours of sleep in a 24 hour period (Ward et al, 2008). An afternoon nap is a common occurrence at the early learning centre. The nap period is usually under an hour in duration. Many early learning centres make a nap mandatory. If the child decides not to nap, they are encouraged to rest or engage in a quiet activity. The nap serves as a time for children to relax and refresh themselves. As many educators know, there are always some children who do not nap, and who make it difficult for others to nap. A key issue is that children of different ages may require more or less nap time. This necessitates staggered nap periods to accommodate younger children of all ages. It also requires ECEs to provide activities and supervision for the children who are

older and do not need the rest, or find it difficult to rest. Naptime also allows the childcare staff to relax and prepare for an activity, or clean up the remains of a previous activity with fewer distractions.

Parental Perspectives on Napping

Parents may be at odds with ECEs when it comes to whether a child should nap. Some parents may feel that the nap interferes with the child's normal sleep rhythms. Parents may also worry that a daytime nap will mean that their child will take longer to fall asleep at night, which can cause a great deal of household stress. A child who has napped during the day may be hard to put to bed at night, because they are too rested to fall asleep easily. However, parents should take this issue on a child by child basis. A recent study found that about 50% of 4-5 year old children will nap if given the chance, meaning that about 50% don't nap. One child may still need a nap at four, whereas another may not need a nap anymore at two. Another issue is that if a child is used to a nap every afternoon, and napping on the weekends is inconvenient for the parents, or the child's planned activities, this can cause friction. It is important for parents to coordinate, as much as possible the napping schedule with their early learning provider. If a parent feels that naptime is interfering with the child's ability to fall asleep at night, it is important for the parent to communicate this to the childcare provider so that they may find alternative activities for the child during naptime.

A Practical Guide to Napping in Children

Keeping in mind that each child's sleep requirement may be unique, here are general guidelines for how much naptime children need at each age (adapted from Weissbluth, 1999):

Newborn: Newborns require roughly 16.5 hours of sleep. This is usually broken into several periods of approximately four hours.

Toddler: The toddler begins the switch from a morning and afternoon nap to a sole afternoon nap for about 2 hours. It is at this point that good sleep routines for both napping and night sleep should be established.

Early Preschool: Disappearance of the tendency to require a morning nap

Mid-late Preschool: lessening and eventual disappearance for a daily nap

Encouraging good sleep habits:

- 1) Routine is important for establishing consistent sleep habits
- 2) Napping in the same location and with the same accommodations (e.g. blanket, teddy bear) promotes good sleep routine
- 3) Children differ widely in their daily sleep requirement. Some preschoolers may need a nap more than others. Be prepared to accommodate children with quiet activities if they do not need to nap.
- 4) Be sure to accommodate parents who are having trouble getting their children to sleep at night after a nap at the daycare.
- 5) A good napping environment is quiet, has low light levels, is not too hot or cold and does not provide too much visual stimulation. Quiet, slow music that is used only at nap time will help condition the association that when the music is played, it is quiet time.

Conclusion

Sleep is important for the developing brain. In addition, research indicates that sleep, whether at night or through naps may be important for children to consolidate

attachment patterns, regulate their behaviour and maintain attention and memory at peak performance. Children differ in their requirements for sleep. The need for daytime sleep decreases as children approach elementary school age. Environment and routine are important for establishing good sleep patterns.

References

- Bernier, A. , Carlson, S.M., Bordeleau, S. & Carrier, J. (2010). Relations between psychological and cognitive regulatory systems: infant sleep and subsequent executive functioning. *Child Development*, 81(6), 1739-1752.
- Kolb, B. & Wishaw, I.Q. (2008). *Fundamentals of Human Neuropsychology*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Lavigne, J.V., Arend, R., Rosenbaum, D., Smith, A., Weissbluth, M., Binns, H.J., & Christoffel, K.K. (1999). *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*;20:28-33.
- McNamara, P., Andresen, J., Clark J., Zborowski, M., & Duffy, C.A. (2001) Impact of attachment styles on dream recall and dream content: a test of the attachment hypothesis of REM sleep. *Journal of Sleep Research*, June, 10(2):117-27
- Ward, T.M. et al. (2008). Sleep and napping patterns in 3-5 year old children attending full day childcare centers. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 33 (6) 666-672.
- Weissbluth, M. (1999). *Healthy Sleep Habits, Healthy Child*. New York: Fawcett Books

Links

Nap resisting and how to stop it

<http://www.canadianparents.com/article/the-napresister-when-your-child-needs-a-nap-but-wo>

A very informative trouble shooting guide for identifying and dealing with nap busters.

Children's sleep needs from Canadian Living.ca

http://www.canadianliving.com/family/parenting/childrens_sleep_needs.php

An article that explains and provides solutions to common sleep issues in children.

Sleep for Kids.org: a website of the Foundation for Sleep.

<http://www.sleepforkids.org/>

A website from the USA Foundation for sleep that explains the importance of sleep to kids.

Canadian Sleep Society

<http://www.css.to/>

A resource on all things sleep related.