

**Q & A: How much sleep do teens need?**  
**Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

**Question:** “My 13-year-old son has turned into a real night owl. Although his school starts at 8, it's often 10:30 or 11 when he turns the lights out the night before. I argue with him that he's not getting enough rest but he rolls his eyes and gives me an “Oh, Mom!” Is this enough sleep for a growing boy and why is he doing this to himself?”

**Answer:** From your letter, I'd calculate that your son gets about seven or eight hours of sleep at night. That's really not enough.

A recent study showed that children and adolescents need at least nine to eleven hours of sleep each night. Many of us grew up thinking that eight hours was sufficient, but researchers at Brown University say that while that may be okay for adults, it is not adequate for youngsters.

What can happen if kids don't get enough sleep?

First, their school work can suffer. Tired students tend to doze off in class and fall behind academically. Second, family relationships are often damaged. The new research shows that many relationship problems between parents and teens can actually be blamed on lack of sleep and the grumpy moods that follow.

So, how can you help your kid get more sleep? Your best bet is to establish bedtime rules and to stick with them. Here are some tips to make that happen:

- Have a bedtime ritual—perhaps a light snack, watch a TV show or two, have him take a relaxing shower and brush his teeth. Rituals tend to set the stage for good habits, and it may make it easier for your son to nod off when he sticks to these usual bedtime activities.
- Use whatever works best with your child. Perhaps reading a book in bed will make him drowsy. Be sure, though, that's it's not his favorite author, or he may be awake for hours trying to see how the story ends! Some children fall asleep better when listening to soothing music, but watch out that it's not too stimulating or this technique may backfire!

- You can try adjusting his biological clock by allowing no caffeine after 4 p.m. and no strenuous exercise in the evening. (You may think that exercise would make him tired, but in the short term it may give him a boost of energy that will interfere with sleep.)
- A strict lights-out policy can be effective, establishing a habit so your child knows when it's time to “call it a day.” Try not to be caught by “stall tactics”—having to discuss something “important” with you that he could have dealt with earlier in the day, or doing homework that should have been tackled before bedtime.
- Finally, stress to your kid that even if he’s just there lying in the darkness but unable to fall asleep, this will provide about 50 percent of the actual benefits of true sleep. He may get frustrated because he's not sound asleep, but the rest *is* doing his body good.

As to why your son is fighting you, the answer is simple: He's a teenager! At his age, sleep seems to be a waste of time because there are so many more “important” things to do (talk on the phone, play computer games, or catch another show on TV). His being reticent to hit the sack is normal, as is your insistence that he gets to bed at a decent hour!

**Dr. Peters’ Bottom Line:** Be firm about this. Your son is at an age when you cannot expect him to use good judgment and reasoning when it comes to health matters. It’s best to step in and set guidelines that you know are in his best interest.