



Learning to Sleep

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 22 December, 2004 - 23:16

Alan Forrester



In the often-tense period before Christmas many parents are especially likely to tell their children that if they don't go to sleep

promptly Santa Claus will not bring them any presents. Or that he will bring them only a lump of coal. Part of their rationale for telling this lie is that they want their children to go to sleep at the same time every night for their own good. I have very little doubt that a coercive parent could produce a whole line of experts recommending that a child should always sleep eight hours a night and maintain a rigorous routine when it comes to sleep. Nevertheless, I think this idea is a bit of a red herring – and here's why.

In reality, a person's interests are rarely best served by sticking absolutely rigorously to a certain routine – even when it comes to sleep. Instead we ought to learn how to make the decision of when to sleep based on the costs and benefits of that decision. Here's a small example: recently I was reading a book (*Downfall*, about the American decision to use atom bombs at the end of World War II). One night while I was reading it I started to feel very tired, and I was still thirty pages from the end. I had to make a choice. On the one hand, if I went to bed and slept I would feel less tired. On the other, it wouldn't take me long to read the last thirty pages, and I could see some benefits of doing so. Obviously, I was interested in what was on those pages. If I stopped I would have to pick up the threads of what the author was saying at the point where I stopped reading, and that would take some time and effort. So I stayed up and read the last thirty pages and then started a new book in the morning. Regular sleep is not infinitely valuable and sticking to a routine has a price. I am not saying that sticking to a routine is always wrong: sometimes it is best. But a person cannot rationally decide whether it is the right thing in a particular situation by applying a mechanical criterion in favour of a sleep routine.

There is a further problem with the dogma of regular sleep. Sometimes, despite his best efforts to the contrary, a person can't get to sleep. Perhaps the room he is trying to sleep in is too warm or too cold. Perhaps he is anxious about his job or his finances. Maybe he is sleeping in a hotel and finds the mattresses the hotel uses uncomfortable because they are too hard or too soft. So should he lie in bed when he thinks trying to get to sleep is going to be fruitless, or get up and do something? Sometimes he should persist and sometimes he should get up, and there isn't a mechanical way to decide this.

Deciding when to go to sleep is a special case of the sorts of decisions people have to make all the time about how to manage their lives. Parents should not impose their particular vision of when it is and is not appropriate to sleep on their children. Instead they should help their child to explore the costs and benefits of different policies on sleep so that he will be able to make rational decisions about sleep instead of adopting a dogmatic and self-denying attitude towards it.

Comments

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Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 12 January, 2005 - 13:11

I agree about what was said here, yet I imagine a struggle with a child going to sleep after the hour of, say, 4am, preventing a family from enjoying the daylight hours and what they have to offer.

A parent who works during the day could end up never seeing hir family awake!

What would be some suggestions for finding common preferences when a parent would prefer more sleep at night and action during the day, when a child prefers the opposite, and the other parent dreams of spending time with an awake family during the day?

to post comments

Learning to sleep...

Submitted by Serious on 5 March, 2005 - 17:18

I agree with Alan Forrester. Allowing our children to sleep when they're ready teaches them much. They learn the consequences of not getting a good nights rest when there's an appointment in the morning they have to meet...they'll soon realise that to make that appt., sleeping at a reasonable hour makes sense. By starting when they're children, they've learned this lesson before they begin working and having to get up at a regular, early time. As far as xmas goes. We had a fairy that watched behaviour, but someone as magical as Santa would not be used to violate my sons person who is human first, and then a child. The last paragraph on different policies on sleep was really important too, for it's what makes us all unique and 'different'. Some of us need more sleep than others, some of us must follow routine, some of us don't. There is no right or wrong way to raise children because our children are bright enough to fit the pieces of the puzzle together themselves. When they want our advice, they will ask for it! Interesting subject!

to post comments

learning to sleep

Submitted by [lunesta \(not verified\)](http://basicpills.com/lunesta-eszopiclon) on 28 April, 2005 - 04:48

hehe, thats a tough job to learn

to post comments

SLEEP

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 17 April, 2006 - 20:58

Sleep is something that human beings need. Tell this to the child. Sleep is replenishing our bodies to have more energy when we get up in the morning. Let children see the natural consequences of their decisions if they decide not to sleep properly.

[to post comments](#)

SLEEP

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 17 April, 2006 - 20:58

SLEEP IS SOMETHING THAT HUMAN BEINGS NEED TELL THIS TO THE CHILD SLEEP IS REPLENSHING OUR BODIES TO HAVE MORE ENERGY WHEN WE GET UP IN THE MORNING. LET CHILDREN SEE THE NATURAL CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR DECISIONS IF THEY DECIDE NOT TO SLEEP PROPERLY.

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