Sleep problems occur in about 10-30% of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and up to 35% of adolescents. These prevalence rates can increase significantly depending on cross-cultural differences and the presence of neurodevelopmental or psychiatric comorbidities.

Inadequate sleep and poor-quality sleep in children and adolescents have been associated with decreased quality of life, poor academic performance, anxiety and depression, deficits in cognitive and behavioral functioning, obesity, a potential increased risk of automobile crash and pedestrian injuries, and social/emotional skills deficits. Experimental studies confirm these are cause–effect relationships. Parents/caregivers also are significantly affected by their children’s poor sleep. Maternal mood, fatigue, sleep quality, parenting stress, and daytime sleepiness are worse when children do not sleep well.

Parents report losing an average of about 35 minutes’ sleep per night due to child awakenings. Untreated, bedtime and sleep problems can become chronic, are rarely outgrown, and can persist throughout childhood and adolescence. Causes for pediatric insomnia are rarely purely physiologic in nature, thus highlighting the importance of targeted psychological interventions.

How Psychologists Can Help

Psychologists are the leading specialists to implement first-line empirically supported treatments for pediatric behavioral sleep problems and to adapt these interventions for special populations, such as children with comorbid chronic medical illnesses. These treatments also have been shown to decrease parental stress and improve marital satisfaction, parental sleep, efficacy, and mood.

Psychological interventions for insomnia in young and older adults are effective, and results are more durable than medications. Young adults with chronic insomnia have greater health care utilization (e.g. physician visits, prescription and over-the-counter medication) than normal sleepers, so early identification and intervention may help to reduce these costs.

Psychologists are trained in the evaluation and treatment of cognitive and mental health conditions that often coexist with pediatric sleep disturbances such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, academic/learning challenges, and substance abuse.
• Psychologists provide behavioral interventions to improve adherence with medical treatments, such as continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) for pediatric sleep apnea. 29, 30, 31

• Psychologists have taken lead roles in the development of accreditation guidelines for sleep psychology training programs and certification of sleep psychologists. 36, 37

References


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