

Sleepy teens hit the bum notes in life

By KYLIE LANG



A GENERATION of sleep-deprived teenagers is not what society needs. Blink and these exhausted, over stimulated youngsters will be adults charged with making responsible decisions, whether they're equipped to or not. Young people who don't get enough sleep miss out on major developmental milestones that enable empathy, respect, reasoning and self-control.

Without the nine to 10 hours a night experts say teens require, they can be not only ratty and rebellious but their ability to make wise choices is compromised.

Today's teens are tackling enough already, what with the pressures of social media and ready access to illicit drugs.

Why allow them to face challenges exhausted?

Dr Michelle Short told an Australasian Sleep Association conference in Brisbane last weekend that most teens were sleep deprived. One in five teens believed they had a sleep problem, yet only 14 per cent of parents were aware of it. Short, a researcher at the University of South Australia, warned that many parents were letting go too soon.

Most high school students did not have a bedtime set by mum or dad, she said. Kids are staying up later because they want to. Hello? Children as young as 13 don't know what's good for them? If they did, they'd be devouring broccoli and laying off energy drinks. Yet parents seem to be looking the other way, maybe too busy or too exhausted themselves to be vigilant.

"Parents have a completely idealised picture of what's going on," Short says.

"Even when kids are tucked up in bed at a reasonable hour they could be texting mates or checking social media."

As I read in a recent interview, without social media kids fear they would "have no life". Parents can't police every move - how deftly my son flicks from homework to YouTube - but we must set limits. And sleep is so important. It is fundamental to wellbeing at any age, but when young minds are being shaped and hormones run wild, a sleep deficit is profoundly detrimental. According to the hierarchy of needs theory proposed by psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943 and expanded in the 1970s, humans must move through stages in order to grow and flourish.

The first is Physiological - and sleep comes in here, along with food, water and air.

Without sufficient of these basics, we can't proceed to subsequent levels of need. These are Safety (personal and financial), followed in turn by Social (love and belonging), Esteem (confidence, achievement, responsibility, respect) and Self-Actualisation (realising personal potential).

Put simply, if we are to become people who relate well to others, achieve our best and contribute positively to the world, we must start from the bottom and work up.

Without enough sleep, food or water, we falter. Ask a teacher how much harder their job is when kids turn up to school without breakfast, and dog-tired. Look at the key causes of road deaths - fatigue is one. According to *YouthSafe*, 15-25 year olds are over-represented in injury statistics compared with other age groups. Reasons include new levels of independence coupled with - inexperience.

Peer pressure is never so great as in adolescence, when kids are motivated more by impressing their mates than by the long-term implications for health and safety. The prefrontal cortex - the part of the brain responsible for hazard perception, impulse control and decision making - is still developing. Maturity doesn't kick in until the early to mid-20s. Without sleep and other basic physiological needs being met, it can take longer.

Parents who opt out of enforcing good sleep patterns hinder their kids' ability to develop the confidence and common sense to withstand peer pressure and think their way out of tricky situations.

I know life is busy, and many of us are flat out trying to get enough sleep ourselves, but as in any generation, kids need routine.

Get computers out of bedrooms, remove smartphones until the morning, do whatever you must to establish a healthy sleep culture.

Plenty of tips can be found on websites such as raisingkids.net.au, happychild.com.au and kidshealth.org.

Teens mightn't like being made to go to bed, but tough. Instead of letting go too soon, parents should be bedding down for the long haul.

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