

Sleep Hygiene and Electronic Devices

Presenting Challenge:

A concerned PCP contacted the [Wisconsin Child Psychiatry Consultation Program \(WICPCP\)](#) regarding a 13-year-old female patient experiencing sleep difficulties. She often struggles to fall asleep, tossing and turning for extended periods. Fatigue during the day has caused her to fall asleep in class. Her parents, who are in a prolonged, contentious divorce, disagree on her use of electronic devices before bedtime. One parent restricts electronic use, believing it contributes to her sleep problems, while the other does not see it as an issue. The PCP requested guidance on how to approach the topic of sleep hygiene and electronic device use with the family.

Consultant's Response:

The Impact of Electronics on Sleep:

It's well-documented that electronic devices can interfere with sleep, especially when used close to bedtime. Devices like smartphones, tablets, laptops, and TVs emit blue light, which can disrupt sleep in several ways:

- **Disrupted Melatonin Production:** Blue light suppresses melatonin, a hormone crucial for sleep, making it harder to fall asleep. While this is beneficial during the day, it can delay sleep onset at night.
- **Increased Stimulation:** Activities such as texting, gaming, or watching videos can increase physiological and mental arousal, making it difficult for the brain to wind down.
- **Sleep Displacement:** Engaging with devices at night can delay sleep since screen time often doesn't have clear start or end points, leading to longer wakefulness.

Sources of Blue Light Include:

- Smartphones and tablets
- Computers and TVs
- LED lights
- Video game consoles
- Fluorescent lights

Recommended Sleep Guidelines for Children:

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children aged 6-13 get 9-11 hours of sleep per night, while teens aged 14-17 should aim for 8-10 hours. Studies show that adolescents who use electronic devices close to bedtime often experience poorer sleep quality and reduced total sleep time, which can lead to:

- Decreased productivity
- Fatigue
- Depression
- Poor academic performance

Assessing Sleep Problems in Youth:

When evaluating sleep difficulties, it's essential to determine whether the sleep issue is primary (the main problem) or secondary (caused by underlying factors such as anxiety, depression, or trauma). If the sleep disturbance is secondary, the primary issue should be addressed first.

- **Severe Sleep Problems:** If the sleep problem is significant and not linked to other issues, consider referring the patient for a sleep study.

Effective Interventions for Sleep Hygiene:

Here are some evidence-based interventions to improve sleep hygiene:

- **Consistent Bedtime Routine:** Establish a fixed bedtime, even on weekends.
- **Avoid Stimulants:** No caffeine or chocolate after the early afternoon.
- **Electronic Device Management:** Shut down electronic devices at least one hour before bedtime. Consider storing devices in the caregiver's room overnight to prevent late-night use.
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** CBT can be highly effective for managing sleep problems, particularly for teens. For more information, check out this resource: [CBT for Insomnia](#).

Note: There are currently no FDA-approved medications for pediatric sleep difficulties.