Media Use and Sleep

Tips from Isidore Newman Counseling

Trick and/or Treat?

October 31, 2016 saw the release of the *Journal of American Medical Association Pediatrics*’ original investigation on the possible links between portable screen-based media devices and quality of sleep. It’s unclear whether they purposely released this on Halloween to allude to screen-based media as a kind metaphorical candy—highly attractive and not terribly nutritious in any significant dosage.

The authors note that their review and meta-analysis of how sleep outcomes are impacted by access to media devices is the first of its kind. Meta-analyses have been around for around three decades and they are a particular type of study used to explore (possibly controversial) topics in which it has been difficult to come to conclusion about the effects being studied. Meta-analyses examine already-existing studies to make sense of confusing and/or contradictory conclusions, so this study is an important one for parents and educators trying to understand how to approach the question of media use in general and nighttime media use in particular.

What did the researchers find?

The bottom line: researchers found that there was a statistically significant correlation between both access to a media device and use of a media device in the sleeping environment with sleep disruptions such as inadequate sleep quantity, poor sleep quality and excessive daytime sleepiness. One remarkable finding was that the increased risk of poor sleep outcomes occurs simply by the child having access to a media device in the sleep environment, regardless of whether they actually utilize the device. This shouldn’t surprise us. Teens describe the feeling of not having regular access to their phones as like “losing a limb.” So, in being separated from a digital device, thoughts and feelings often turn to the device and the kinds of connections it affords.

So, what’s a parent to do?

It’s important for you and your teens and pre-teens to understand good sleep hygiene and just what promotes a healthy night’s rest. Mark Rosekind’s work (noted below) is particularly helpful in that regard. Try to have all screen time stop at least 45 minutes prior to going to bed. Teens often lay in bed for a while before actually falling asleep. Doing that with a phone or tablet in hand might feel “relaxing” but it actually signals the brain that it needs to delay the onset of sleep. Fighting over access to a digital device isn’t relaxing either. Try to let your child take the lead in “turning in” the device before bed. Access to cellphones and other digital devices with screens are felt to be a right and necessity, but they are privileges that require responsible use, conversation with parents and ongoing assessments of what is and isn’t working relative to their uses. The price of any privilege or freedom should be an ongoing conversation about the benefits and limits of that privilege.

Resources: www.commonsensemedia.org; http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/teens-and-youth/ See also Mark Rosekind’s “The Science of Sleep” (on the Newman website)

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