

# Sleep Deprivation in Children - bratty or just tired?

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Kids change when they don't sleep enough. Most parents have experienced this phenomenon first hand.

My youngest daughter went to a sleepover party last night and, despite the mom's Herculean efforts, she didn't get to sleep until midnight. The morning fun began at seven am, which left her with a four hour sleep debt.

In the morning she was fine. In the afternoon she was fine. But by late afternoon the

effects of that poor night's sleep came barreling in. First came the high-pitched hysterical giggles and hyperactivity. I recognized this as the rise before the crash. By dinner time she was withdrawn and by bedtime she was unglued. Her frustration tolerance had sunk to zero and even small slights committed by her sister elicited a catastrophic response.

It didn't trouble me because I knew the cause. Clearly, with a day or two of good sleep, my calm, sweet, patient pumpkin would return.

But this did get me thinking. If anyone had seen her behavior tonight they might have assumed that she is... well, lets say it... a brat. Maybe the children that I see wreaking havoc in the supermarket are just really, really sleepy.

Many studies show a strong link between sleep deficit and behavioral problems in children. I certainly saw that myself. I wonder how many parents agonize over their children's behavior yet let them stay up until eleven pm playing video games. It can be hard to enforce an early bed time, especially if your child's friends get to stay up later, but it is truly worth it. A calm, well-rested child who gets along well with family members, teachers and friends is a pleasure to be around.

So how much sleep does your child need? It differs of course, based on individual factors. Some people seem to have a genetic need for more sleep, while others may find behavioral challenges worsening when sleep levels are low. A preschooler generally needs 10-12 hours per night, while a younger school age child needs between 10 and 11 hours. An older elementary age child, over 10 years of age or so, can generally do well with 9-10 hours of sleep. Even teens should get at least 8 hours, and probably more.

If my kids routinely stayed up until 10:00, my life would be harder. There would be more fights and fewer laughs. After this one evening of sleep-deprived poor behavior, I appreciated the reminder to enforce those early bedtimes. As the school year approaches, we all need to get back on schedule, and it can be easy to give in to pleas of "just 10 more minutes, pleeese!" Parents, be strong. You will be glad you did.

Good sleep = good behavior. And good behavior makes for a more peaceful home.

Be well,

Dr. C.

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(photo courtesy of travelblog.org)

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