

Vicki Dawson is founder and CEO of The Children's Sleep Charity.

For communication, please email: [vicki@thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk](mailto:vicki@thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk)

## Vicki Dawson

# Supporting young people with sleep issues to meet their full potential

The Children's Sleep Charity was founded in 2012 to support families of children with sleep issues. The charity works throughout England and Wales, providing services to ensure children and young people get a good night's sleep that will promote their emotional, physical and mental well-being. Support includes parent workshops, accredited training for professionals and one-to-one sleep clinics.

In 2014, the charity identified that a high number of requests of support were from teenagers and developed a project outline to explore how to work more effectively with young people in the future.

We spend a third of our lives asleep, yet there is still very little support for young people when they face difficulties with their sleep. It is typical for teenagers' sleep times to shift to later in the evening, with many then finding it difficult to wake up in the morning. Many young people find that their body clocks can become disrupted, falling asleep in the early hours and then wanting to lie in until lunch time. Supporting the body clock with a good sleep routine is vital to ensure that young people have a better night's sleep. One significant concern that became apparent is that adolescents often need to wake early to begin school at 8.30am; this works against their biological rhythms which can lead them to be lethargic and unable to meet their full potential.

In 2015, the charity worked alongside the Sleep Council to provide sleep tips, following a survey of 1000 youngsters that demonstrated the impact of exam season on young people's sleep.

Some key findings of the survey were:

- 83% of teens admit their sleep is affected by stress and worry
- 56% admit to regularly cramming all their revision for an exam into one night

- 82% used their bed for revising/studying
- 26% of teens drink energy/caffeine drinks to stay awake
- 46% find themselves snacking more often when revising

This work further highlighted the need for quality sleep education to be available for young people in order to support their mental, physical and emotional well-being.

### Developing effective methods

Funding was received in January 2016 from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to work closely with schools across Yorkshire and the Humber to consult with young people and develop effective methods of supporting them to improve their sleep patterns. The charity was inundated with applications from schools that were keen to take part in the project and 5 were selected. The schools that were chosen included one that housed a specialist unit for young people on the autism spectrum and a pupil referral unit, ensuring that our project was as inclusive as possible.

### Steering group

It was important that the young people's voices were heard so each school was encouraged to establish a steering group of pupils to meet with a sleep practitioner. James Wilson was identified as the sleep practitioner to develop the work and identified that the themes in each school were very similar. James has great experience in supporting individuals with sleep issues, as well as being a sleep practitioner he is a bedroom environment expert. James was also able to empathise with the young people as he struggled with sleep issues himself as a teenager. "The steering groups highlighted how little information most pupils know about sleep. The small amount of information that they did have was derived from

Google. The overwhelming message was that they wanted support around sleep issues which many of them had been struggling with for several years.”

### **Peer support**

James met with the steering groups on a number of occasions to develop his relationship with the pupils and to get a deeper understanding of support that would be helpful. Peer support came out as being a particularly favourable way of gaining information. Pupils also shared that they liked the idea of being able to attend a clinic to get specific one to one advice from a sleep practitioner. Online support was not favoured with young people stating in each setting that they wanted to receive face to face support from a sleep specialist.

Peer support sessions enabled pupils to understand about sleep in more depth, recognising the importance of sleep for their physical, mental and emotional well-being. Information was also given around strategies that could help them to get a better night's sleep. One 14-year-old who experienced peer support said “It was really helpful to meet with others who have sleep issues. I always thought it was just me that was struggling. It can feel very lonely when you are awake until the early hours. Just being able to talk to other people who understood was really useful.”

### **Anxiety**

Many of the youngsters described feeling anxious about not being able to sleep. A common scenario that emerged was that they were often told by their parents to go to bed at 10pm, for example but were then wide awake into the early hours of the morning. They clearly weren't able to fall asleep at this time, which was raising anxiety levels. Explaining to young people about the circadian rhythm and sleep cycles helped them to identify why they couldn't fall asleep and we were able to work with them to gradually move their body clocks to a more appropriate sleep time. Some young people found keeping sleep diaries helped to identify patterns in their sleep habits. It also helped them to see the progress that they were making over a period of weeks while they implemented the changes recommended.

### **Technology**

Technology was perhaps unsurprisingly found to play a large part in many young people's sleep issues. Robust evidence exists demonstrating that

the blue light emitted from electronic devices can interfere with sleep patterns (Bossi, and Hopker, 2016). Light and dark play key roles in keeping our body clocks on track, since our melatonin (sleep hormone) levels are governed by darkness. Light promotes wakefulness and the blue light given out by screens can suppress melatonin production. Limiting the use of technology in the hour leading up to bedtime can significantly support a better night's sleep. However, the majority of pupils were not aware about the scientific evidence around screen activities interfering with sleep patterns and genuinely believed that accessing gadgets would help them to relax and fall asleep more easily.

Mobile phones in particular were thought to be causing disrupted sleep in over 85% of the cases. Many youngsters left on the sound on their phones and therefore were woken throughout the night when messages were received. Others shared that they woke frequently during the night to check their phone, anticipating that a message may come in and potentially sleeping more lightly than would be typical at that point in the night.

The steering groups discussed at length how to implement a good routine. With technology being discouraged they often found that they needed some new ideas around how to spend the hour leading up to their sleep time. Playing a musical instrument, reading or listening to music were all found to be helpful. Pupils were introduced to mindfulness and some found this a useful way to wind down before bedtime.

### **Adults' perception**

Another theme that emerged from the steering groups was the perceptions of adults around young people's sleep. Many pupils shared with James that they believed that their parents and school staff were unsympathetic or even unaware of the issues they faced. In one school, parents were contacted about their child's sleep and over 80% responded by saying that they didn't believe their child had a sleep issue. Other young people shared that their parents believed that they were lazy and lacked empathy for the difficulties they were facing. 30% of the young people had been referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health teams for support around their mental health and sleep issues. The remaining pupils had not received any support prior to the intervention.

### **Workshops and discussions**

Some young people chose to take part in group

workshops in order to access support while others preferred to speak on a one to one basis. Educating pupils about the importance of sleep made for an excellent starting point. Most were unaware about how sleep affects appearance, weight, memory and ability to meet their full potential. Bedtime routines were typically associated with much younger children, so introducing the idea that a good routine can help to support their circadian rhythm was of great importance.

Diet also played a key part in the discussions with many young people relying on stimulants such as energy drinks or caffeinated drinks to get them through the day. Some foods such as yoghurt, peanut butter and bananas can help the body to produce melatonin. Sugary snacks are best avoided in the lead up to bedtime. One young person shared, "I'd not realised that the cereal I was eating before bed contained so much sugar. Simply switching to another kind and stopping drinking energy drinks in the evening has helped me to feel much calmer".

Direct intervention began over the summer months and through to the winter, which allowed us to explore the range of difficulties that young people face in terms of light levels. Melatonin levels rise as night falls and exposure to light in the evening can suppress the production of the sleep hormone. Light occurring in the early hours of the morning during the summer months means that the melatonin levels can drop and we can once again feel more alert. In the winter months, it can be very dark in the morning which can make it even more difficult to wake up. Exposure to bright light on waking can help naturally re-set the internal body clock and make you feel more alert. Young people who were particularly struggling to wake up in the morning were given a light box to use over a one month period and results demonstrated a significant increase in their alertness patterns in the morning.

#### **Drama activities**

The voice of young people is to be captured through a piece of drama devised by one school as part of the project. Pupils at the Sirius Academy in Hull have embraced the opportunity that taking part in the project has brought and have developed their own piece of theatre based on the outcomes of the steering group. A film crew will be joining them later in the year to record this and it will be used on the charity's website in order to

engage other young people in learning about sleep.

#### **Resource material**

Resources have been developed in order to deliver sleep information to staff in schools, to parents and to the young people. The charity is currently going through the accreditation process with the materials ahead of a pilot which is being attended by teaching staff, school nurses and teaching support staff. The vision is for every school to have a 'Sleep Champion', a member of staff who has been appropriately trained about young people's sleep and can offer meaningful support to improve their sleep patterns as required. The training will also include materials for the Sleep Champion to share sleep information with colleagues and parents through the delivery of an accredited workshop.

### **Parental engagement**

A key finding from the project was that the best results, in terms of improving sleep patterns, came when parents engaged with the sleep information and supported the young people.

As a former teacher I'm very aware of the pressure on staff to increase attainment. I do think that good quality sleep is absolutely fundamental. Sleep deprivation can have a profound effect on all aspects of well-being and a young person simply cannot meet their full potential if they are sleep deprived. Sleep needs to be on every school agenda and staff delivering sleep support must be appropriately trained. We are delighted that the schools we have worked alongside have allowed us to enhance our practice in order to develop innovative resources to support young people to achieve the very best they can.

### **Feedback**

Pupils fed back that they are finding the sleep support both informative and helpful with a number seeing significant improvements in their sleeping patterns after only a couple of weeks of intervention. While providing the information to pupils is empowering, the findings also suggest that it is important to offer support to encourage pupils to make the necessary changes and to keep them motivated.

Educating school staff and parents was also highlighted as key to supporting young people to have a good night's sleep and therefore meet their full potential.

For more information about the project visit The Children's Sleep Charity website at <http://www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk> or contact Lauren Slack on [info@thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk](mailto:info@thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk). The Children's Sleep Charity are very grateful to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for funding this project.

#### Reference

Bossi, A.H. and Hopker, J. (2016). Twilight: filter the blue light of your device and sleep better. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* (Accessed: 27 November 2016). Available at: <http://www.academia.edu/download/45966013/2016 - Bossi - Twilight - filter the blue light of your device and sleep better.pdf>

## Education and Health

The journal, published by SHEU since 1983, is aimed at those involved with education and health who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of young people. Readership is worldwide and in the UK include: primary; secondary and further education teachers; university staff and health-care professionals working in education and health settings. The journal is online and open access, continues the proud tradition of independent publishing and offers an eclectic mix of articles.

**Contributors** (see a recent list) - Do you have up to 3000 words about a relevant issue that you would like to see published? Please contact the Editor

## Education and Health Archive

Each issue of the journal, published since 1983, is available via the archive. There are several simple indices that help to identify articles by keywords; year/issue number; author surname and article title. It can be seen that some contributors have had a number of articles published and there are a range of topics that have been covered over the years. Sometimes a contributor will update their article or develop points raised by another contributor. The pages on the website, that have been provided for the Education and Health journal, usually have the highest number of 'reads' across all pages on this Internet site.

## SHEU

Schools and Students Health Education Unit

The specialist provider of reliable local survey data for schools and colleges and recognised nationally since 1977

*"The (SHEU survey) helped us to prioritise where we needed to be in terms of PSHE education. We delivered assemblies based on the evidence as well as curriculum development, and dealt with whole school issues – particularly in regard to pastoral care. The answers received to the question on the survey Who are you most likely to approach if you needed help worried staff as teacher was not a popular answer. Subsequently the staff asked themselves why this had happened and what needed to be done to address the issue. There was more emphasis on wider aspects of PSHE education delivery, which needed more attention. To summarise, the (SHEU survey) allows the PSHE department to assess the impact of teaching and learning and modify future lessons accordingly. It allows our school to look at whole school issues such as the extent to which the pastoral care system is meeting the needs of our pupils. It helps us to do need analysis of our pupils. It helps to provide important evidence for SEF / the extent to which we are meeting wellbeing indicators / National Healthy School standards."* Secondary School Head

For more details please visit <http://sheu.org.uk>