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Lisa Artis

The Sleep Council's teaching resource: '*Better Brains with More Sleep*'

With numerous reports in the media that children and teenagers do not get enough sleep, The Sleep Council believes that sleep should be on every school's agenda and this article describes what it is doing to help 'sleep awareness'.

"Sleep is absolutely essential to health and well-being," says Jessica Alexander of The Sleep Council. "We have actively promoted the importance of sleep for children and teens over the years and have conducted research surveys on the subject."

"It is my belief that teaching children the value of good sleep should rank alongside the importance of healthy food and exercise in schools.

"The government's *Change 4 Life* programme is a great initiative but, unfortunately, it does not mention sleep, let alone teach it in school. Yes, diet and exercise are extremely important but so is sleep. Today's way of life is seeing more and more children and teenagers getting less and less sleep due to the popularity of smartphones and tablets and the rise of social networking." With no legal requirement to include anything about sleep on the school timetable, the word 'sleep' does not even appear in official national curriculum guidelines.

"It's not just us that think sleep should be taught," says Jessica. "Our *Pillow Time* survey in 2009 found that 73% of respondents thought children should be taught about the importance of a good night's sleep at school. Six out of 10 went as far as to say sleep education should be included in the national curriculum."

"Sleep is something that every single one of us does without giving too much thought to just how important a good bed is to a good night's sleep. And how important good sleep is to how well we cope with everyday life. Students, in

particular, need to ensure they get a good night's sleep or they risk obesity, heart disease and mental illness. It is crucial for memory, learning and growth."

'Sleep awareness' education project

In March 2012, The Sleep Council launched its first-ever 'sleep awareness' education project in primary schools for its annual awareness event, National Bed Month.

A free learning resource was provided to schools nationally, with the aim of teaching primary school children the importance of a good night's sleep and factors - such as regular bedtimes and a good bed - that can affect it.

"There is a lack of understanding and education about the subject," says Jessica. "Daytime tiredness in young students is a real issue, so schools need to provide more formalised information about the benefits of sleep as part of ongoing compulsory health education."

"Some parents, for instance, don't know how many hours sleep their child needs. As a general rule of thumb under three's need 12 hours sleep a night; four to six year olds between 10.5 and 11.5 hours; six to 12 year olds around 10 hours and teenagers about eight to nine hours."

The 'sleep awareness' initiative followed the results of a survey '*Time to Learn*' of 250 primary school teachers conducted on behalf of The Sleep Council. The survey was carried out, between February 8 and February 14 2012, by Opinion Matters via an online survey/telephone survey. A total of 251 UK primary school teachers (teaching pupils aged between 4 and 11-years-old - reception to Year 6 classes) took part.

The survey revealed that lack of sleep among

primary school children was having a devastating effect in schools with nine out of 10 teachers (92%) complaining that pupils were so tired they were unable to pay attention in class. More than a third (38%) said lack of sleep among youngsters is a daily problem for them.

"As part of our 'sleep awareness' project we wanted to establish just how much of an issue lack of sleep has become among young schoolchildren," said Jessica. "Even we have been taken aback by the sheer scale of the problem."

'Better Brains with More Sleep'

The learning resource, '*Better Brains with More Sleep*', consists of four lesson plans with clearly identified learning outcomes suitable for eight to 11 year olds. Each lesson plan includes teacher's notes on how to structure the lesson and photocopiable activity sheets for pupils. As part of the activity, pupils will be asked to produce a 'sleep diary' which is designed to get them thinking about, and interested in their own sleep patterns, as well as their parents', and to help them understand that people have different routines.

Said Jessica, "The resource pack is designed to teach pupils about the importance of a good bed and a good night's sleep in a fun, informative and interactive way. Our survey would suggest this is information that needs reinforcing among primary school children."

"We are very lucky to have Fara Butt of Shire Beds on our marketing committee. Fara's teaching background has been extremely helpful in preparing what we think is a really good educative lesson plan."

Said Fara Butt: "Speaking as a teacher myself,

I think the lesson plan is very good. Not only is it a fun and much needed tool to help educate children from an early age on sleep but also their parents! The fact that kids can take the lesson plan home and do it with their families makes it an enjoyable, interactive tool that is extremely relatable to everyday life."

According to the '*Time To Learn*' survey, lack of sleep has become such a widespread issue in primary schools that nearly a quarter (24%) of the teachers questioned admitted that they had had to resort to letting children who are very tired sleep in a corner of the classroom.

Nearly nine out of 10 teachers (88%) felt that too many distractions in the bedroom (games machines, TVs etc) were at the root of sleep related problems along with the fact parents are simply not strict enough about enforcing bedtimes (82%). And more than half (55%) agreed that the brightest children in the classroom are the best slept and most wide awake.

Said Jessica, "Lack of sleep would appear to be a problem across all primary school age groups which is a real concern. Our schools project will involve pupils monitoring the sleep habits of their parents which will hopefully also serve to remind them of the need to ensure their children get a decent night's sleep if they are to do well at school."

For more information or to request a '*Better Brains with More Sleep*' teaching resource please email lisa@sleepcouncil.com

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