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Troubling Students' Sleep Habits Spark "Back to Sleep" Campaign

By Jennifer Wake

Years back it was a punishment to be sent to your room. But Orinda "sleep guru" Robert deStefano says with computers, TVs, cell phones, and video streams on iPods, bedrooms have become a "jungle of connectivity" and, consequently, stimulation. "It's a perfect storm of sleep-robbing factors, the least of which are the demands of our high-performance culture and perhaps more significantly our growing inability and lack of desire to unplug," deStefano says. "Eleven and twelve year olds are hooked into endless IM, MySpace and Facebook conversations. Kids as young as nine or ten go to sleep with their cell phones in fear of missing a text." According to the National Sleep Foundation, children ages 5 to 12 should get between 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night. Yet a report in the Journal of School Health states studies show school age children are averaging seven hours of sleep or less. A former insomniac who taught himself techniques to break the cycle of insomnia nearly 10 years ago, deStefano hopes to entrain self-sleep skills at an early age for local students to use later in life. "The 'now' benefits are huge," this father of two Miramonte students says. "Under-sleeping in kids is directly linked to child obesity and diabetes, bad behavior and lower grades than those kids who get nine to eleven hours [of sleep]." While tactics vary depending on the age of the child, deStefano says the strategy is consistent: employ transitional devices. "Same as with adults, the children's bedroom needs to be the place that is focused on rest and sleep," he says. "And just like anything else, boundaries and rules are critical to a positive result." DeStefano is planning several workshops, which will focus on promoting sleep music, lighting, aroma therapy and sleep-friendly room design, as well as the establishment of fun and effective pre-bed sleep rituals to release stress, calm and promote deeper sleep. The parent training classes, which are open to the public, will be held at 11 a.m. on Sept. 23, 29, and Oct. 5 at the Oakwood Athletic Club (advance registration required by calling 283-4000 and asking for the activities desk). Additional classes will be offered at the Orinda Community Center in the future. "As a nation, we're raising generations of chronic insomniacs," he says. "At some point we have to draw the line in the sand, and for me that time is now." For more information, you can visit deStefano's Web site: www.learn2sleep.co.

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