

From: Mary Jo Mastriani [maryjom@cscinc.org]
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FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health

To Nap or Not to Nap

We often hear that children don't get enough sleep; they stay up too late at night and then have a hard time getting up in the morning and act tired, sluggish and grumpy at school. Parents and caregivers of young children understandably want to avoid the problems that come with lack of sleep and so they often require children to take naps; they also need the brief break from childcare that naps provide to recharge their own batteries and accomplish other tasks. Plus, research shows that getting enough sleep early in life improves children's ability to self-regulate; reduces hyperactivity, anxiety, depression and behavioral problems; improves brain processes; and promotes secure emotional attachments.

At the same time, children differ in their need for sleep and develop at their own rate. While some children seem to need a nap every day until around age 5, others seem ready to give it up by age 2. Also, there is new research suggesting that daytime napping can negatively affect cognitive function in preschoolers. One study kept track of a group of children ages 3-5 who were enrolled in full-time childcare. The study found that children who napped more during the day were more likely to nap on weekends as well and slept less at night, and that daytime napping resulted in a shorter attention span and less ability to recognize pictures and numbers. More nighttime sleep helped cognitive function and reduced the need for daytime naps.

So how do we make sense of information that might seem contradictory? One short answer is to be flexible and not require a "one-size-fits-all" approach, especially in childcare settings:

- Maintain a routine so children know when to expect rest time; scheduling it for the same time each day takes advantage of a child's biological rhythms
- Create an environment that helps children relax, whether they fall asleep or not (quiet music, low lights)
- Provide options for children who don't want/need to sleep and/or whose parents would prefer they not sleep during the day. Examples: "quiet time" activities such as coloring or other craft activities, listening to music or a story on CD, reading or looking at books.
- Pay attention to signs from children that they are ready to nap or to give up napping