

**W**ith the lengthening days, warm sunshine, and the early arrival of daylight savings time, it can be hard to convince our children (and ourselves!) to get enough sleep. We offer this article by Tim Marsden, a Eugene Waldorf School teacher who graduated his eighth grade class in 2006. Tim wrote this as a letter to his class parents when that class was in third or fourth grade:

**Dear Parents,**

The following is a description of sleep and, in case of sleep irregularities, some practical suggestions. They are from personal experience, advice I got from veteran teachers and notes I took from a lecture on sleep given in the summer of 1999 by Dr. Takacs, an anthroposophical physician in Portland. While I intend this article to address children's sleep issues, many suggestions are equally applicable to adults.

For those that are unfamiliar with this terminology, I would like to start with a brief description of the anthroposophical model of the human being, consisting of four interconnected and dependant systems or 'bodies':

**The Physical** body consists of all that is mineral – that which remains after death.

The **Etheric** or life force body keeps all life functions and processes going at an unconscious level. It is responsible for physical rejuvenation and growth. It is also associated with bodily cycles and rhythms, memory and habits. Regular routines and rhythm strengthens the Etheric, which in turn takes better care of the physical.

The **Astral** or feeling body is associated with emotions, antipathy, sympathy, time, drives, desires and urges (including fear, curiosity and excitement).

The **Ego** is our unique individuality, our essential "I", the observer, the spirit. This is not to be confused with the Freudian Ego.

As we fall asleep, we experience our daytime consciousness slipping away, but what is actually happening? Anthroposophy tells us that in an adult the Astral and Ego pull away, leaving the Etheric to sustain and rejuvenate the Physical body.

In a child younger than nine, the Astral expands away from the Physical during sleep and then comes closer during the waking hours. An actual separation of the Astral from the Etheric and Physical body starts to happen at the nine-year change, which is usually in third or early fourth grade. This can be a cause of sleep-related anxiety at this age as, deep down, the child experiences falling asleep in a new and unfamiliar way.

Common sleep problems include nightmares, trouble falling asleep, waking in the middle of the night, fear associated with sleeping alone and fear of the dark. Bearing in mind the above description of sleep, here are a few suggestions to help address these everyday sleep issues:

1. Some time after the ninth birthday children go through an inner 'consciousness' change, known in

Waldorf circles as the ‘nine-year change’. It can be expressed outwardly through fears, especially of separation. It sometimes seems as though a child’s behavior is reverting to an earlier stage. Knowing that this is quite a common phenomenon may make it easier for the adults to be patient and reassuring. Know that this phase will pass and falling asleep will get easier.

2. Have a regular evening or bedtime routine for the children. For example: tidy up, bathe, put out clothes for tomorrow, hear a familiar story, light a candle, say the birthday verse, say a prayer and say goodnight to everyone. Try to make some elements of the routine the same every night, even if your child asks for variety or your schedule makes it necessary. Why? Routine strengthens the Etheric, which enhances sleep’s effectiveness. It is familiar, like an old friend. It allows the child to relax and feel safe. If my day has been stressful or chaotic, I look forward to the children’s regular bedtime routine. The more you get into it and enjoy it, the more relaxing it will be for your children.

3. Do not stimulate the Astral and give it a reason to ‘hang around’ with exciting games, arguments, bickering (even if the child is not involved) and toys that stimulate (e.g. construction toys, puzzles). Over-stimulation and its effect on sleep is another reason to avoid or limit TV, movies, computers and video games, especially near bedtime. In this same vein, bedtime is not a good time to reveal big plans for tomorrow or the coming week; discuss them earlier in the day.

4. Be careful what you read at night. Avoid any stimulation of the Astral by promoting even a small amount of fear through a story. A tale that is fine during the day can be too much at night when the child is much more open.

Some children, at certain times, may need to avoid new stories at night because they are too stimulating. Aim for relaxation rather than entertainment. Because we are often at our most open and vulnerable when we are close to sleep, fears are closer to the surface.

5. If possible, have a smaller meal or lighter food in the evening. This may be difficult because of the rest of the family, but stimulating the digestion near bedtime, especially with a lot of heavier foods or foods that take more energy to digest (fats, meat, beans and nuts) can delay and interrupt sleep. Avoid stimulants including a lot of sugar; many children are even sensitive to fruit or fruit juices in the evening.

6. Rhythmic activities help, such as a familiar neighborhood walk or gardening in the summer, cleaning, artistic work or handwork in the winter. My family’s regular bedtime routine involves the children knitting, crocheting or beading while I read stories to them. Plenty of exercise, a connection to nature and artistic work earlier in the day also help promote sleep. Children might not be sufficiently physically tired if they have had little or no exercise in their daily routines.

7. Try to keep the bed-time and wake-up times as consistent as possible, especially going into and coming out of the weekend. Switching from an early weekday routine to a much later weekend (and back) can have the same effect as jet lag – forcing the child onto a different schedule. For an adult it is typical to make up one hour of jet lag per day. Children are more sensitive to change than adults are. For a teenager, this can be a big factor in sluggishness during the week and in other health issues.

8. Body temperature needs to drop slightly for a person to fall asleep. If they are too bundled up or the

heating is too high it can delay and interrupt sleep. If a child's room is very cold, you might try using a hot water bottle rather than a heater.

9. This might sound obvious, but light keeps us awake. If your child is afraid of the dark, use a candle at bedtime or a discrete night-light, which you can remove later. In the summer, put heavier drapes or cloths over the bedroom windows to make the room darker.

10. Here is one for the adults! The more alcohol we drink the more it encourages us to fall to sleep faster, but the cycles of sleep are not as deep and we do not wake as refreshed. It makes us prone to interrupted sleep and an inability to get back to sleep once we wake up.

11. Because our Astral and Ego leave behind the Etheric (associated with memory) and Physical during sleep, we do not remember what happens between falling asleep and waking. This 'void' can be scary to a child, especially around the nine-year change. What imaginative pictures of sleep does your child carry in his or her consciousness? Does s/he picture sleep as a return to old friends or maybe s/he sees it as a frightening descent into nothingness? Try to nourish the child's soul with spiritual pictures of sleep and nighttime that are consistent with your own beliefs.

12. Sleep is a time for strengthening and rejuvenation so make sure that your child is getting enough sleep. Younger teenagers still need around 10 hours a night so as not to feel depleted.

*Sleep well!*