



The After-Dark Engine of Growth and Development: A Father's Take on Sleep

As a father of a 3-year-old boy, I have come to appreciate the importance of sleep—not just for my own sanity but for my son's, development, and happiness. We began the sleep training programme when he was just two months old, a decision that felt both ambitious and necessary. In retrospect, it was one of the best parenting choices we have ever made.

The journey, however, was not easy. Like many parents, we faced

the usual challenges: irregular sleeping patterns and the tug-of-war between comforting our child and encouraging independence. But with patience, consistency, discipline, and a lot of trial and error, we found a rhythm. Today, our son sleeps soundly through the night and wakes up refreshed, ready to explore the world with curiosity and joy.

Beyond the personal benefits, sleep is essential for children, especially during preschool years.

Kindergarten represents a formative three-year period characterised by rapid physical and cognitive development in



children. According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, children aged 3 to 5 should get 10 to 13 hours of sleep per 24-hour period, including naps, to support their health¹.

Why is sleep so critical? One key reason is Growth Hormone (GH). GH is primarily secreted during deep sleep, also known as slow-wave sleep (SWS). This hormone plays a vital role in bone growth, muscle development, and tissue repair. These results make uninterrupted quality sleep crucial for healthy physical development² in young ones.

A 2024 article published in *Frontiers in Endocrinology*

highlights the complex relationship between sleep and GH in children³. It emphasises that sleep disruptions can negatively affect GH secretion, potentially impacting their growth. Similarly, research from Harvard Medicine underscores that brain development also accelerates during sleep, which plays a key role in memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and learning⁴.

As a parent, I have seen firsthand how sleep affects behaviour. On days when our son has not rested well, he is more irritable, less focused, and struggles with transitions. This aligns with



findings from the National Institutes of Health's Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study, which showed that children with insufficient sleep had more behavioural challenges and impaired cognitive functions, including decision-making and memory⁵.

Unfortunately, in a fast-paced society like Hong Kong, sleep is often sacrificed for other priorities, such as homework, tutoring, extracurriculars, screen time, or spending time with family, especially for working parents. While these activities have their place, they should never come at the cost of sleep. Research

consistently shows that sleep deprivation in children has many negative affects⁶.

So, what can we do as parents?

1. Treat sleep as a non-negotiable part of your child's daily routine.
2. Establish consistent bedtimes, even at weekends.
3. Create a calming bedtime routine—for us, it involves bathing, reading, and cuddles.
4. Limit screen time before bed, as blue light can interfere with melatonin production.
5. Avoid overscheduling; children need downtime to rest and recharge.



Sleep is far more than just a break from the day. It is an active, restorative process that fuels growth, learning, and emotional resilience. As parents, we have the power to shape our children's sleep habits early, setting them up for a lifetime of healthy development.

I hope our experience encourages other families to take sleep seriously. It is not always easy, but the rewards for your child's health and your family's harmony are immeasurable.

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