

Teens' sleep cut short by high-tech toys

by Vikki Ortiz Healy

A relaxing summer evening for 18-year-old Ross Nikides last week went like this:

He and five friends brought laptops to another friend's house to play "World of War Craft" and other Internet games against each other.

Around 4:15 a.m., one of the guys craved a milkshake, so they piled into two cars and drove around Carol Stream, Ill., in search of an ice cream shop still open.

An hour later, they were back at the friend's house, slurping down their drinks while checking Facebook and playing X-Box until they finally fell asleep—cellphones by their sides—around 6:15 a.m.

"It was a good bonding experience with friends," said Nikides, who woke up 7 hours later and had enough energy to go for a run.

Nikides and other teens are averaging 6.5 to 7.5 hours of sleep a night, well below the 9 hours recommended in a newsletter . . . by the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.

Hanging out with friends and staying up late may not be different from what some teens did 30 years ago, but new research suggests technological distractions that teens have access to today cut into the quality of their much-needed rest. . . .

Yet despite years of warnings about the risks of insufficient sleep—including poor school performance, obesity and, as presented in June at an annual meeting of sleep researchers, links to depression—teens and their parents say adolescent exhaustion remains a fact of life.

And the best they can do is to balance their teens' need for sleep with their need to keep up with today's technology.

"Teens don't value sleep because there's too many things going on to distract them," Nikides said.

One night last week, Ryan Cassidy, an 18-year-old recent high school graduate, began playing Xbox at 10:30 p.m., using two-minute breaks within the game to play another game on his cellphone. After two hours, he moved on to his laptop, on which he watched a TV program and checked his Facebook page during commercials.

Cassidy eventually decided to go to sleep at 2 a.m.

“I’ll wake up a little tired, and I know it’s because I stayed up late playing games or something, but to me, it’s almost worth it,” the Geneva, Ill., teen said.

Teens need adequate deep and REM sleep to rebuild long-term memory for learning, focus attention for driving and maintain health and fight obesity, said Dr. Matthew Edlund, director of the Center for Circadian Medicine and author of “The Power of Rest.”

“From a public health standpoint, I look at this and I am scared stiff,” Edlund said. “They’re so connected to their machines that they’re treating themselves as though they don’t need any rest.”

The shift has left parents struggling to set rules that will keep their teens rested in today’s age.

Stephanie Cassidy, Ryan’s 48-year-old mom, said summer rules are more lax, but over the school year she and her husband banned computer use—except for homework—on week nights. They also enforced a 10 p.m. bed time and put limits on Xbox and other game use at night.

“Sometimes I’d like to take all the electronics and throw it out the window,” Cassidy said. “They need their sleep . . . and until they learn and see the reality of it for themselves, they might not know how to do that.”

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