Promoting Healthy Sleep Among Low-income Children Presenting to Urban Primary Care

Statement of Problem

Insomnia (difficulty falling/staying asleep) and insufficient sleep during early childhood have been shown to negatively impact child development. For example, sleep problems can lead to inattention and poor social-emotional skills, which can make it harder for children to be ready for school. With insomnia and poor sleep impacting 20-30 percent of young children, the National Academy of Medicine has referred to poor sleep as a critical public health concern for the last decade.

Although there is a robust evidence base for the benefits of sleep intervention in early childhood, few studies have examined the efficacy of such treatments among low-income groups. Research shows that children exposed to socio-demographic risk factors are more likely to show sleep difficulties and often face substantial barriers to accessing and engaging in care. Pediatric primary care is an ideal setting to deliver interventions given how accessible it is to families and the expansion of behavioral health services into primary care. Intervention in primary care may be especially feasible during early childhood, when there are many well-child visits. Unfortunately, there is little research on sleep intervention programs in this context.

Description

This project seeks to address the salient gaps in knowledge related to the lack of tested, evidence-based behavioral sleep treatments delivered to low-income families in pediatric primary care. This research will adapt and re-package evidence-based behavioral sleep education and intervention strategies, with a focus on developing scalable interventions that we can disseminate to primary care and other community contexts.

First, we will conduct interviews with patients (caregivers of preschoolers with sleep problems) and primary care providers to identify attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that are critical for adapting and implementing a sleep intervention for low-socioeconomic preschoolers in primary care. Based on what we learn, we will adapt and implement behavioral sleep intervention strategies and obtain feedback from an advisory board consisting of Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia family partners, primary care providers and sleep intervention experts. Our final step will be to measure the efficacy of the adapted intervention in a pilot randomized trial with families referred to either the adapted sleep intervention in primary care or a waitlist control group.

Next Steps

Investing in sleep health is crucial for child development and a critical movement toward equitable health. As nearly one-third of low-socioeconomic children do not get adequate sleep, there is an urgent need for accessible solutions to help families. This project will also support research on the adaption, implementation and evaluation of brief behavioral interventions in primary care so we can better understand how to use the

primary care setting to support improved sleep health.

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Related Tools & Publications

Behavioral Health: A Snapshot of a PolicyLab Research Portfolio
Tools and Memos
Aug 2025

Benefits of a Bedtime Routine in Young Children: Sleep, Development and Beyond
Article
Aug 2018

Changes in Sleep Duration and Timing During the Middle-to-High School Transition
Article
Jun 2020

Cumulative Socio-demographic Risk Factors and Sleep Outcomes in Early Childhood
Article
Sep 2019

Early Childhood Sleep Intervention in Urban Primary Care: Caregiver and Clinician Perspectives
Article
May 2020

Identifying Modifiable Factors Linking Parenting and Sleep in Racial/Ethnic Minority Children
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Longitudinal Sleep Problem Trajectories are Associated with Multiple Impairments in Child Well-being
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Sleep Problem Trajectories and Cumulative Socio-ecological Risks: Birth to School-age
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Sep 2019

Sleep Well!: A Pilot Study of an Education Campaign to Improve Sleep of Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Children.
Article
Dec 2016

Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Sleep in Early Childhood: Real-world Data from a Mobile Health Application
Article
Mar 2021

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Blog Post

Mar 15, 2021