Child Sleep and Behavior: How Rest Shapes Learning and Emotion | Brenda McSween Transcript

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Introduction and behavior as a signal

Hi, welcome. I am Dr. Rachel McConnell and I'm your host and the creator of our Masterclass series here today called Why is my child acting this way? So I' m a board certified pediatrician with over 20 years of experience and so there's a lot of information out there, a lots of parenting tips and tricks out here, but my approach is a little bit different.

because I think that the behavior your child is showing you is a signal. It's not necessarily the problem, it's just that there's something going on, and this is how it is coming out, And this how they're displaying that's there is an underlying problem.

So it time to stop guessing and start understanding. I'll see you soon. Thanks. Hi Brenda! Welcome, thank you so much for joining us today. You're most welcome.

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited about this. Excellent. Yeah, I am excited to hear what you have to say about sleep. Do you mind introducing yourself and what do you do for our audience, please?

Absolutely. So, i'm Brenda McSween. i am a pediatric sleep consultant and a parenting coach. And I have my Bachelor of Child Studies degree with over 20 years of experience working with kids and families.

Um, and then I have, um, the best experience is I'm a parent myself. I had a 14, almost 15 year old and two step sons that are grown adults now. Um. So we have quite a dynamic family and, I started as a sleep consultant about 13 years ago.

Meet Brenda McSween and her sleep background

Okay. Nice. Uh, right. When your son was a baby. Right after he was done being a baby, I became a sleep consultant. And my reasoning for that was because with my Bachelor of Child Studies degree, i felt like i knew it all, right?

I felt I knew at all and I was flabbergasted by his sleep. So I went on a mission to find out more information and to help others. Um, and that's when I started Parenting Foundations.

All right. Nice. Yeah. Hopefully we'll get a lot of your insights here in our talk today. Yeah. Perfect. All right. So the name of our summit is called, why is my child acting this way?

So when parents ask you that question, what is it that you want them to understand or what do you to tell them? You know, my biggest thing is I really want to them understand that there can be very many causes to why a child is acting that way.

And one of the things that often gets under looked or at least not even considered is a child's sleep. A child sleep can impact them in a huge manner and in ways that you don't expect.

All right, totally true. As a parent myself, I have seen that and we're gonna keep catching on that throughout our talk today. So something that we have talked about throughout the summit is that behavior is often a signal and not really the underlying problem itself.

How does that connect with the work that you do? It's a huge piece because it's one of the big things I'd actually talk to families about. I actually ask them how their child is behaving during the day to get a good sense of is sleep

an actual issue or is there something else going on?

Because if sleep is the issue, there's lots of things that we can do to fix it. If a child is not sleeping well at night and their behavior is impacted during the day, there's lots of things that we can do to make change.

How sleep affects daytime behavior

Okay. You said their behaviour could be impacted During the days. So what kind of behaviors are you noticing? Well, you know what, it really depends on the child.

But typically, I see lots Of things like they're either really clingy, Um, could be a little bit on the, like the whiny side or full of energy, extreme energy.

And you're like, what's going on? It's actually that they're overtired or there's, there a lot going there. We'll get more into the overtire thing in a bit.

Um. But yeah, the big time behavior is when like you, you just like they are literally full. Okay, yeah, and that's not at all what you think when you that your baby is overtired.

No. What's one of the biggest misconceptions that parents have about your area of expertise and what do you do? Oh, man, I have so much to say here. So one the big things is like we talked about, the lack of sleep can impact so many different things, right?

It can really impact a child's ability to focus, be present. It could affect their appetite. it can affect so many different things. And I have a really cool story.

At least I think it's cool. Before I became a sleep consultant and actually before I become a mom, I was a mental health therapy assistant in a pediatric mental-health unit.

And all of the kids that came in, we always did an assessment on their child's sleep before we went anywhere else. And the reason was because things like ADHD, anxiety, lots of other mental health issues can actually present when the child's overtired or if they're not getting the adequate sleep, they actually can present like somebody that has ADHD anxiety.

So before we went down that hole, we always made sure that they were getting enough sleep. And a lot of times parents were just like, what do you mean?

This can't be what's happening. We get sleep on board, get asleep going well, and mental health improved hugely.

Sleep needs by age and recommended hours

Nice. So I know in my practice, I'll ask them how is sleep going and they'll tell me, oh, it's terrific. And I'm like, well, how much sleep are you getting?

And they're like oh plenty of sleep, like seven hours of asleep. I am like Oh my. What can you share about the quantity of the sleep and the quality of that parents should be looking for?

it really depends on the age of the child. So what I often refer to are the different like the amount of recommended hours of sleep. And a lot of times parents are just like, what is that how much my child should be getting?

So from birth to four months is typically 14 to 17 hours. Some people do say 15 to 18 hours, and then from four month to 12 months, is 12 to 15 hours and then you've got from like from 1 to age 3 is 11 to 14, right?

3 to 5 is 10 to 13 hours, and from 5 to 12 is typically Of course, it just kind of escaped me at the moment because I'm doing this by memory is typically from like it's 10 from 5 to 12 is 10 to twelve hours.

Is that correct? Do you roughly? Yeah, that's usually about what I recommend to people. Yeah. So it's that 10 to 12 hours. They're like, what do you mean?

My seven-year-old needs 12-hours of sleep? They really do. And there are some kids, like you can line up a whole bunch of children that are the exact same age and their sleep needs may differ.

You've got some that need more and you've some need less. so you need to really understand where your child's at. Um, but if they're in that recommended zone and they are still having some behavior type stuff going on or something's not quite right, I always recommend try to increase that sleep a little bit and see if that behavior gets better.

Excellent. Do you have any recommendations for parents to actually help now with the quality of sleep? Because sometimes you're like, oh, they've got the TV going or this or that.

So what recommendations do you to help with that quality sleep. OK, so really, this is when we get into, I think, an interesting discussion that often you don't hear.

but like first we'll talk about screens right and the impact that screens can have on sleep.

Screens, bedtime routines, and calming strategies

So because of the light that comes off of this screen it actually stops the production or reduces the reduction of melatonin which is that sleepy hormone that little ones need to be able to go to sleep and stay asleep, right?

So if they have a screen, that's what's like, especially if it is got a lot of blue light, which is what a lotta screens do, specially TVs, computers, iPads, unless you turn it into night mode, it's really gonna impact their sleep.

So I often recommend no screens, at least one hour before sleep. Um, but ideally, especially under the age of, I want to say five, But it could even be like six, seven.

Yeah. I would say that it should be, um, two hours, like, so two Hours before asleep so that then they're, they are able to settle a lot easier. Typically, a bedtime routine for a child that's older does take almost an hour.

So once you start your routine and they get into the rhythm, then you're gonna know that by the lights out, you have your hour, as long as screen is not included in your bedtime.

Okay, so that definitely one thing. Did you something you wanted to say? Well, you mentioned bedtime routine. Can you give us some like good examples of a bedtime?

Routine? Cause I know every household can be different. Every child can. Be different, yes. And this is where this these things get quite interesting.

It's cause you often hear that you need to have this quiet, serene bedtime, routine, right? And there's a lot of kids that do need a very structured bedtime Um, like that high energy kind of play.

Then you, then you start to slow things down. Um. And then, so often I recommend if your child gets a bath every day, Then, you do the bath at the beginning of the routine.

If they don't do it every. Just on the days they do, it just, just put it at. The front of. It doesn't matter if they. Don't. Do. One. Every. Day. It's not the end of the world.

Maybe instead of doing a bath, do like a wipe down. So they're getting, they have that idea. Then after that they are getting dressed, brushing their teeth and then they off to bed.

Right? But then there's other kids that need way more during the bedtime routine. And I often refer to these little

ones as ones that just need a little bit more input.

They're not the quiet, serene kind of kiddos. They need more hugs, they need energy going to bed. The not-so-young guy that just walked in here, it was my first experience with that.

His bedtime routine could not be that quiet routine. We had to have rough and tumble play as part of our routine and on the days that we didn't do that, we skipped it.

Bedtime took a lot longer. So if we just took five to ten minutes and did something like, him and his dad would wrestle, they would play fight, his older brothers would get involved, you know, like they'd help have that play and then he would just be able to settle for sleep.

Now, I'm not a big wrestler because I have some chronic pain. So what I was able to do is throw a mean pillow on the days that I would do a bedtime routine and have a pillow fight.

Right? And when we did that, he could settle a lot easier. And what settle looks like for him and for a lotta littles that i work with, So if you do the bath, you're either having your rough and tumble play, usually after you have your bath get dressed, then it's the rough-and-tumble play.

Then it is that high-energy kind of play that includes a lot of pushing, pulling and tight, like bear hugs, that kind stuff can really help. Um, and then after that, then we go in and sit for storytime because he can sit then, right?

Littles can then sit and enjoy that. Um. And then like for us, we actually ended up introducing a weighted blanket because they needed that extra little hug to be able to go to sleep.

Those are strategies that I often talk to families about. Does that make sense? Okay yeah I know that is terrific because you're right usually it's like you start hearing your entire routine just brings you down there's no ups or downs in it.

Yeah. And there's a lot of kiddos that they're just not quite ready for that, right? They need a little bit more input. Um, so, and their, their quiet going into sleep is short, is very small.

They don't need. A lot. Of it. Whereas we're used to having that quiet serene routine and they don t need that. they actually need more. input, they need, more, um, physical input and then when you do that then they can settle.

Perfect. No, that's really reassuring because I think a lot of parents out there who wrestle with their children before bed, like, don't want to tell anyone because they feel like they're stimulating them.

So they want like keep this hush-hush. Right. Exactly. And that is why I will shout this on the mountaintops because there is, there's so many good people and you're afraid to say anything, right?

Because there are a lots of shame and a a of things that come around parenting and sleep. I hope that we can banish that myth. Oh, yes, that would be great.

Do you have any advice for maybe the day leading up to the sleep routine? Things to make sure you've incorporated during your day or things to maybe make that you're not including or at certain times?

Food, light, and caffeine before bed

Okay. So one of the big things is like food. Do you mean like, food? Like, so a really good thing is what your children eat. Food, drink, movement, light.

Yeah. Obviously, one of the obvious things is really reducing sugar before sleep, right? But one good thing that can help promote sleep is actually a good quality fat.

Later in the day can really help. So like a Greek yogurt, nut butters, avocado, that could really helps. And that's one the things that I often use with younger children that are really struggling with sleep.

Okay. And then the other thing is like one of the things you mentioned was light. Light is one those things that can really impact not only screen lights, but just light in general.

So the darker, the better. If you can get your child to be comfortable in a very dark space, then that will be very beneficial. If your child has a fear of the dark, or if there's something going on that they're just not quite able to be in the dirt, using a red light.

So red lights can actually help. It doesn't stop the production of melatonin. But redlight, if you need a nightlight or a light of any sort, that is definitely one to use.

No worries, life happens. Do you have any recommendations about caffeine? Because I know it's not uncommon for parents who are drinking sodas or coffee to let their kiddos have a sip or have some of their own.

So like this is, it's not an area of my expertise on being able to give you like amounts, but what I can say is that caffeine will impact a child's ability to go to sleep.

It will, cause it does. And it keeps them in that kind of high energy moment and you don't want that, right? Do you have any more information to add with that?

Like with your background? Oh, yeah, no, for me, I definitely talk to them about brain growth and development and how it's still growing. So we don't need any of those extra stimulants or substances that can be addictive.

I try to really minimize that as much as is possible for my family. Well, it is really tough, right? Because sometimes people don t realize the impact that that could have.

Yes, yeah. Especially if it doesn't make them hyper, I think. It's easy if you're like, oh, give them some of my whatever and they're bouncing off the walls.

But otherwise, if they are not, you are like did that even affect them? Yeah, and it can be hard for people to understand that, right? Yes. Totally. All right.

Let's see, I think we touched on this a little bit, but let's circle around, because I this is probably a huge one. So, parents are often surprised to learn that overtired children don't always look overtire.

Can you talk a bit about what you may see in an overtured child? Absolutely. I love talking about this because people are like, what do you mean? So typically, when you think of somebody that's tired, you're thinking of someone that is not able to keep their eyes open, they're sleepy, drowsy.

Recognizing overtired behavior and the second wind

This is almost not the right word, but I'm going to use it. It's almost in and out of consciousness. There's in-and-out. That is so not what happened.

That's not that's what happens with a lot of children. They actually end up looking like they are hyper, full of energy, spirited. Like you want to talk about a child that is overtired.

You're looking at a job that literally running around or at least clumsy, clumsy like bouncing into things. Like my son used to literally bounce off the furniture and we'd be like, oh, we know, like let's go.

It's time to go because you don't even realize that they're that tired because they have energy, right? They look like they had energy. But it's actually like a second wind, it is their…

Um, they're, their bodies, adrenaline kicking in to kind of help them be awake. And when, when you're on that adrenaline kick you, it is like you are, you were moving and so your littles will move a lot.

Um. So. A lot of times when families would say to me, well, there just. She's just so full of energy or she's so just full energy. And I'm like, there's no way she'd be ready for sleep.

I said, trust me, try and try 15 minutes before you typically do. Because you're actually, if you, you you are trying and they're that hyper at that point, that means you've missed that window.

So you want to back up your bedtime by about 15 minute so that you don't get into that overtired spin. Excellent. Do you have any other tips for letting people kind of recognize the end of the first wind before that second wind comes?

Yeah, I would say like a lot of times, you will see, you'll start to see the behavior amp up a little bit. If you start see that excitement start happen, or if they're getting clumsy and like it bouncing into things, that's your clue.

Like, let's go now, right? Let's get going. A lot of like with my son, he would get a whiny, but not super whiney. But there's a lot of kids that would get very, like if you said anything to them, especially the word no, they would have a little bit of a meltdown, right?

And then all of the sudden, so that's your window, and then you miss that window then they get into that overtired spin. Do you have any other experience with your kiddos?

Oh yeah, my older son was the worst. If we missed his like, oh, we should have put you to bed 10 minutes ago. Like literally every night he would end up with some bruise somewhere.

And it was like and we're done. It's crazy. Yeah. Um, do you notice a change in that overtired behavior for the different age groups? I do. I, I notice, um, Like the younger age groups, you're going to see what a lot of what I'm talking about.

Older age, groups like say, I want to say like eight and above. Instead of seeing the overtired kind of the hyper activity going on, You see a Non-compliance, I guess.

I know for us, we get a lot of questions. We get about why. It's more of an overactive brain versus an overarching body. Um, and one of the, one, another big things, as I said that I'm like, that's when you, I often will see with a lot of my clients, a of that anxious thinking too, cause they start replaying everything.

Um. And especially if they, when they were younger, if there were quite active during sleep, um, And then they're older and you don't do the rough and tumble kind of play beforehand.

but you're noticing that they're anxious, like they are laying there thinking. That's when I really start to look at introducing things like guided meditative stories or podcasts so that when they lay in there, instead of thinking, overthinking things, they actually able to relax and calm for sleep.

Okay. Lovely.

Older kids, anxiety, and self-directed wind-downs

So for those kids who needed rough and tumble play when they were younger, do you ever recommend like, Oh, Do some stretching, to some yoga poses, or do some isometric exercises before bed?

Absolutely, absolutely. Like if they are a kiddo that needs that input, teaching them how to do it in a more self-directed manner is good. So like yoga is a great one.

You brought up a good point. One of the things we have in my son's room is he actually has one of those

basketball nets behind the door and he'll play basketball, like full on doing layups in his bedroom.

for a few minutes before he's ready to go to sleep. So having that interaction and that ability to get that energy out really helps. And he started that on his own a couple of years ago and he still does it, right?

Like he'll still do it. If he doesn't feel like he is ready for sleep, he knows he needs to do a little bit of that and then he gets ready. Okay, lovely.

So I know a lot of the parents I talk with, they're super busy. Like their kids are in sports or maybe they are starting to do homework or dance recitals, whatever.

They are very, very busy people. And so sometimes they'll tell you that they don't even get home from sports until like 9 o'clock. So do you have some realistic ways that they can prioritize sleep without feeling like they have to do it perfectly or that?

They have. Give up every activity that. They love. Okay. So one of the big things is like, like you said, life happens, right? Life, Life happens. Things go on.

Um, things are occurring all the time. One of. The big. That I recommend is on the nights that you can stick with the bedtime routine as much as you. And have shortcuts available on those nights.

if practice goes a bit later. So like for us, an example would be having the snack on the way home. In the vehicle on their way to home, instead of coming home and having to have a snack.

Having that snack so that he has that before he gets in the door, and then we can be quick acting when he get in. Doing things like that can also be helpful.

Just making sure that when you get home, that you just start doing things to slow down the environment as quick as you can. And typically, my son was in basketball, and he would have practice till 9, 30, 10 o'clock just last year.

It's crazy. Right. It's crazy. But he also knew that he needed to get to bed as soon as he got home because of how sleep really impacted him. So one of the things that I would talk to a lot of families about too is just if your child is one those that gets impacted by lack of sleep.

making sure that you have conversations about it. So the kids understand, you know, I had a headache today and I don't like, don' understand why. And can talk a little bit about, well, when you're overtired, sometimes it can present like having a head ache.

Busy schedules, late practices, and realistic sleep habits

Um, so if that's the case, then we need to do some things to make it so that get a better quality sleep on the nights that have to have practice later.

Okay. Is that answering your question? Yeah, no, that was great. So let's see. For our parents listening today, if they're like, oh, I need to make some changes, but they are feeling a bit overwhelmed, what would be one small change that you would encourage them to begin with?

The very first thing that I would recommend that they do is just look at when are they offering sleep. Like when are they actually offering that it's time for bed and make sure that's the right time of your child.

And you can reverse engineer that from when your needs to be awake and figuring out how many hours your children does well with. That's how you get your bedtime.

So we actually just did that the other day. My son and I talk about this all the time. many hours of sleep he needs and what time he needed to be awake.

So in order for him to get that amount of asleep, he need to in bed by this time. Of course he's always trying to push it, right? But I'm like, well we know what happens when you do.

Just reminding him of that a lot. Okay, that is excellent. When you're reverse engineering, a lot of times I've noticed families are like, okay, so I need this many hours of sleep.

So I'll go to bed at this time. But then if it takes them this amount of time to actually fall asleep, So sometimes they don't take that into consideration and also sometimes their word that is taking their child too long to fall asleep Do you have any recommendations about that?

I'm in bed, but not yet asleep window So typically it really depends on the age of the child, but usually like three and over you're looking at about a 15 minute window, right?

You're. Looking at like if they're in bed and like they have to settle in for sleep, you want to give them at least 15 minutes where they are able to.

have that little bit of downtime, if it takes longer than 15 minutes to go to sleep, then we may need to look at that bedtime routine and look when bedtime is being offered.

Because you may actually need offer it earlier because what you're experiencing is overtired during bedtime. Right? Because it's harder to get to bed when you are overtire than it is when your just ready for sleep.

That's one thing I should have mentioned when we were talking about overtiring children. is like with bedtime, overtired children really struggle to go to sleep, right?

So then you think, well, they're not ready for sleep. No, we've missed that window. Okay. I know that's a great point because I think a lot of parents who notice that will be like, oh, They're Not Ready.

Finding the right bedtime and parent encouragement

And they'll actually start to decrease sleep instead of moving in the other direction. So that is a terrific point to make. Yeah. So I'd like, I often will look at that and I'll say like okay, is this, Is this an overtired or undertired tired child?

And here's the thing, it's really hard to really understand that because they both look the same, right? They both fight bed. It's a lot. I will sometimes start with offering bedtime a little bit later, just a bit, like maybe 15 minutes.

And if there's no impact, then I back it up. Then I go the other way. All right. Excellent. Yeah. So you're experimenting. I love that. Yes. A lot of times.

With my children. You know, I feel like that's what parenting is all about, right? It's a constant experiment. Just trying to figure out what works. Exactly.

As long as you don't have an explosion, then you are good. All right, so for our parents today who were, you know, maybe exhausted or discouraged or wondering like, oh my gosh, like I'm struggling with this parenting thing.

Like I don't have all the answers. What's one message that you would like to leave them with? There's so many things, but I would say the biggest thing that I'd like families to know after listening to myself and the other speakers that you have in this lovely event is that parenting is not it's not an easy thing.

It's something that it ebbs and flows. And if you have a bad day one day, it doesn't mean tomorrow is going to be a day. Right? So rinse and repeat happens a lot, but also give yourself some grace and understand that just because yesterday wasn't great doesn' mean tomorrows gonna be.

You can always restart. Excellent. Thank you. You're welcome. For parents who want to learn more about you and

the work that you do, where can they find you?

So they can find me on my website is parentingfoundations.com. I'm on Facebook at Parenting Foundations and on Instagram parenting underscore foundations.

All right. Perfect. Well, thank you so much again for joining us today. You're welcome. And I look forward to seeing this all together. All right. Thank you.

Okay. Take care. You too.