# **Why letting children go to bed when they want will make them obese: Going to sleep at irregular times makes them 50% more likely to be fat**

* **Irregular bedtimes makes children 50% more likely to be fat, study found**
* **Fluctuating bedtimes reduce levels of hormone that regulates appetite**
* **Researchers found bedtime is more influential on weight than exercise**

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Children whose parents do not enforce a regular bedtime are 50 per cent more likely to be overweight or obese, scientists claim.

They found that youngsters whose bedtimes fluctuate suffer a kind of jetlag because their body clock keeps being reset.

This leads to a reduction in levels of the hormone leptin, which regulates the appetite and tells us when we are full, researchers at University College London said.

They found that going to bed at different times had more of an effect on children’s weight than the amount of television they watched or the sports they played.

Lead author Professor Yvonne Kelly said: ‘When we do not have enough sleep, or regular sleep patterns, studies show that impacts on different hormones that influence appetite.

‘Increased levels of leptin cause you to crave things, so you might want to eat chocolate or crisps because you feel tired and in need of an energy boost.

‘On average, it benefits children to have a routine around bedtime.’

Researchers looked at children born to more than 19,000 families between September 2000 and January 2002 in Britain, asking when they went to bed and whether any five-year-olds stayed up after 9pm. The children were aged from three, when they need up to 12 hours in bed, to 11, when nine and a half hours is enough.

The study, which was published in the US journal Paediatrics, found an irregular bedtime, along with sleeplessness and skipping breakfast, were important ways of predicting whether a child would be overweight.

Professor Kelly added: ‘If you travel across different time zones and mess around with sleep patterns, you get jetlag.

‘The same sort of thing, a social jetlag, has an effect on the sleep children get. If they went to sleep at 7pm one night, then 11pm the next, and then between 8pm and 10pm, they would never catch up on the number of hours they need.’

She said families may be tempted to let children choose their own bedtimes, or allow them to stay up late, because of the pace of modern life. Parents arriving home late from work, for example, are often keen to see their children.

But the study has been taken as suggesting that a fixed bedtime is best, following research from the University of Houston earlier this year which found children aged seven to 11 deprived of sleep were more likely to suffer depression and anxiety when they were older.

Sleep expert Nick Littlehales said: ‘When parents have a baby, they get a cot, stand over them to make sure they get enough sleep, but once they are past that point, can almost leave children to get on with it.’

On tips to get a child to sleep he advised a dawn simulator lamp, which slowly dims over half an hour, total darkness, a ban on tablets and telephones and bedtime stories.