The Magic of Sleep

(The following is a piece by Dr Carolyn Ee which has been adapted to suit our school aged children)

If you want a simple and effective way to reduce your risk of chronic disease, maintain a healthy weight and eat healthily, improve your moods and brain function, and keep your immune system healthy, try to make sleep a priority today!

No matter where we are in the world or how we've been impacted by COVID-19, many of us will have experienced some disruption to our sleeping routines.

Sleep is a crucial part of a healthy lifestyle, and it's something that people don't prioritise enough. Yet it's relatively simple to establish healthy sleep habits, and the benefits can be profound.

Why is sleep important?

Getting the right amount of sleep can have a wide range of important benefits including keeping us physically healthy, helping our brains work well, and promoting emotional wellbeing.

If we are not sleeping well, this can lead to problems with memory and learning, metabolism and immune function, and emotional and behavioural control. Poor sleep may also lead to poor lifestyle habits, increase the risk of infection, have a negative impact on mental health and increase chronic disease risk.

How do I know if I'm getting enough sleep?

If you are waking up naturally without needing an alarm, and feel refreshed when you wake, it is likely you are getting enough sleep.

If you:

- are needing an alarm to wake you up
- do not feel refreshed when you wake
- are sleepy during the day

you may not be getting enough sleep. If you're not getting enough sleep you accumulate a 'sleep debt' during the week, which is difficult to 'pay back'. The irregular hours that you are sleeping and waking may upset your body clock.

What can we do during the day to improve our sleeping habits at night?

Prioritise: Make sleep a priority and value it for its amazing restorative qualities. Sleep is as important as eating and drinking water.

Timing: I recommend getting up at the same time each day and going to bed at the same time.

Daylight: Getting enough daylight is an important part of establishing a good circadian rhythm and promoting sleep at the right time. At night make sure the room is dark and cool. In the mornings get outside as quickly as possible This triggers your bodies awake response. Natural light sends a message to the brain slowing its production of melatonin (sleep hormone) in response to natural light, making you feel more awake and giving you that morning adrenaline boost.

Stay active: You may want to try online exercise classes (including yoga), dancing, strength training or cycling. If you're having trouble sleeping, you could try a morning walk or run rather than doing this in the evening.

Have a warm bath: A warm bath 1-2 hours before bed will help you fall asleep faster. This might be due to our bodies cooling down faster after a warm bath and helping the circadian rhythm.

Avoid excessive caffeine, especially in the afternoons (remember that green tea, cola and energy drinks contain caffeine).

Avoid naps or limit them to 20 minutes maximum (set an alarm)

Practise relaxation techniques to manage stress. For example deep breathing, yoga and meditation, which are very effective ways of calming down the nervous system.

What are good habits for before bedtime?

- Try to read the signs and go to bed when you are tired.
- Create a calm and quiet ritual in the hour before bed. You might like to do some meditation, write in a journal, have a bath, or listen to a relaxing podcast or music.
- Go to bed at the same time each day.
- Our bodies need darkness in order to create ideal sleep conditions. Two hours before bedtime, avoid or limit screen time, and keep lighting low

In the evening you need a couple of hours of relative darkness to induce melatonin (sleep hormone) production and a good night's sleep, so it's a good idea to limit screen time and use this time to wind down gently.

Your Task – Experiment on yourself!

Over the next three days I want you to analyse your sleeping habits. Think about you habits. Do you use screens before bedtime? Do you have screens in your bedroom? Do you drink caffeine in the afternoons or evenings? Is there too much light getting into your bedroom? Do you go to bed and wake up at different times each day? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then that habit is probably having a negative impact on your sleep.

Over the next three days I want you to change these habits. Pick a sleep and wake up time and stick to them. Turn off all screens at least an hour before bed (to encourage your body to produce melatonin – our sleep hormone). Make sure your room is dark and peaceful with no lights or distractions. Do something calming like reading a book, listening to relaxing music or even gentle yoga or stretching. Then in the morning get outside to start your day. Also try to exercise during the day.

If these changes in routine help you to get better sleep then let your teacher know by writing what worked well for you on Seesaw! Make sure to tell your family and friends too. Wishing you a great week and an even greater week's sleep!!