

BEDTIME WITH YOUR CHILD

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Regardless of age, regular schedules and bedtime rituals greatly impact our ability to obtain sound sleep and function at our best, and the same goes for children -- even more so. Establishing and maintaining good sleep habits helps your child fall asleep, stay asleep, and awake rested and refreshed. It may also prevent future sleep problems. Good sleep habits can not only take the stress out of bedtime, but can help make it the special time it should be for you and your child.

If you have a difficult time getting your child to go to bed at night, the first step is to figure out *why* your child says, "But I'm not tired!" Is he in need of more attention? Is he scared of the dark? Is he feeling the need to assert his independence? Or, the answer could be that he *really* isn't tired. Your child may have a natural inclination to be alert late at night. In order to reduce your child's resistance, think about his stage of maturation, his bedtime routine, and any important changes in his life, such as a divorce or death in the family.

Insecurity and Distractions:

Many children are afraid of being alone in a dark room. It leaves them to their own imaginations, and it's easy for them to envision monsters in the closet or under the bed.

Your child could also be experiencing a bit of separation anxiety. Does she have a hard time going to day care or the babysitter's? She could be feeling some of that same worry when she has to leave you to go to bed at night.

The continued noise and activity level in the house at your child's bedtime may be distracting her from falling asleep. She may be afraid she is missing out on the fun, and will maintain, "I'm not tired!" In these circumstances, consider the following solutions:

1. Tackle fears.

Talk to her about her fears and kindly explain that she is safe and you won't let anything happen to her. Let her keep her door open a crack, and keep the hall light on. It is not a good idea to offer to stay by her side until she falls asleep as this could make your child become dependent on your presence every night.

2. Set routines.

Give your child at least half an hour to relax and get ready to go to bed. Comforting rituals include taking baths and reading bedtime stories. Remember that predictability will increase your child's sense of security.

3. Establish a consistent bedtime.

Once you choose a bedtime that will give your child enough sleep (11 to 12 hours is the typical amount of sleep needed by a three- to five-year-old), be sure to enforce it. All children benefit from a regular sleep schedule.

Bedtime Rebellion and Desire for Extra Attention:

Your child could be saying, "I'm not tired," in order to challenge your authority and practice his manipulation skills. Children have a strong desire for control as they get older. Or, your child could have a real need for more attention. Professionals suggest that if a child needs some extra attention from a parent, he's apt to stall sleep--because calling out to a parent and postponing bedtime are good ways of getting attention. If this is your situation, try applying the following tactics.

1. Remind them of the RULES:

Be kind but firm about bedtime. Don't get involved in arguments about why you think bedtime should be at 8:00 and why your child thinks it should be at 9:00. It is crucial to stick to the time you've set. If you frequently give in to your child's stalling tactics and let him stay up later, you're apt to find yourself caught in a nightly power struggle.

2. Offer rewards.

You can encourage your child to get ready for bed by telling him that he can have an extra bedtime story if he is ready for bed by a certain time. Give the incentive of a special weekend outing if he is ready for bed on time all week. (If he continues to fight bedtime, however, you might consider taking away privileges.)

3. Give more attention.

Help your child look forward to bedtime as a special time to be together. Read a second bedtime story or have a good talk. If he doesn't want you to leave when it is time for him to go to sleep, remind him that you will have more time together the next day.

"I'm Really Not Tired!"

Kids fall asleep when their body temperatures drop. They wake up when their temperatures start to rise. If you try to put your child to bed before her temperature has dropped, she will be telling the truth when she says "I'm not tired!"

You can change your child's sleep pattern (the process usually takes about two weeks) by waking her up fifteen minutes earlier each day. By waking your child up earlier, you'll be creating a small sleep deficit during the day. Your child will be tired and more apt to go to sleep earlier at night.

If it is also difficult to wake your child in the morning, establish a long and gentle wake-up routine. Start an hour before your child really needs to get out of bed. Cover her with another blanket to raise her body temperature. Play music, and turn up the volume every fifteen minutes. Give her a glass of juice to raise her blood-sugar level.

Resistance going to bed is caused by a desire to manipulate or get attention from parents. Nagging, threatening, spanking, and scolding won't work. Even negative attention will be a reward to the child. If you give a child attention or power, the behavior will continue. If you damage the self-image, more serious problems will develop. Instead you should allow children to lie in bed and read or play quietly. Be sure to give praise when they cooperate at bedtime. If the issue of sleep loses its power to upset parents, children will get the sleep they need.

There are no hard-and-fast rules for sleep behavior, and as always, there is individual variation. Your child is unique. If your routine is working, then it is probably best for you. That said, some approaches work better than others, and the following guidelines have been shown to be effective.

1. Make sleep a family priority and part of your daily schedule, advises the National Sleep Foundation. Determine how much sleep each family member needs and ensure that they get it. Discuss any sleep problems with your child's doctor. Most are easily treated.

2. Learn to recognize sleep problems in your child. According to the NSF, you should look for things like difficulty falling asleep, nighttime awakenings, snoring, stalling and resisting going to bed, having trouble breathing, and loud or heavy breathing while sleeping. These sleep problems can be evident in daytime behavior such as being overtired, sleepy, or cranky.

3. Consistency. As in all aspects of parenting, consistency and follow-through are key ingredients for success. Without them, you just can't expect your child to learn or change behavior.

4. Teamwork. If you are co-parenting, it is important to discuss your strategy beforehand and work as a team. If you are beginning a nighttime program after having some difficulty with your child, explain your new expectations, if your child is old enough.

5. Set a regular bedtime and waketime. This sets and aligns expectations for both you and your child and allows you to plan the bedtime routine accordingly. Otherwise, you may have a tendency to slip and slide late into the night. In addition, this helps keep your child's internal body clock, or circadian rhythm, on a 24-hour cycle. Since our normal daily rhythms are around 25 hours, we would tend to drift out-of-sync with the 24-hour day, if it were not for external cues like a set bedtime, a bedtime routine, lightness, and darkness.

There is not one ideal bedtime for each child, because sleep needs, lifestyles, and napping patterns can vary considerably. However, you can look at the typical sleep requirements for various age groups and use it as a guide. Note that this does not apply to newborns and infants younger than about 4 months, because their biological rhythms or internal clocks are immature and not yet regular.

6. Routine, routine, routine. Kids love it, they thrive on it, and it works. Routines set expectations and help train behavior; a nightly bedtime routine helps your child learn to be sleepy, just like reading in bed may put some of us adults to sleep (even when we're out of bed). The structure of bedtime routines also associates the bedroom with good feelings and provides a sense of security and control. Routines can take the stress out of bedtime and help make it a special time, especially if you have more than one child.

This is a time to wind down. So calming activities, like taking a bath, reading a story, or perhaps a gentle massage are good choices. Keep TVs, computers, and the like out of the bedroom, because they can arouse your child and keep her up later.

Let your child know what the routine is, including the time limits involved, and stick to them. It is often very helpful to give notice that time is almost up, like, "We have just three more pages of our story," but be firm and do not go past your limit. Uncertainty breeds tension, and arguments may follow. A key goal in any routine is teaching your child to soothe herself so that she may fall asleep unassisted and put herself back to sleep unassisted when she awakens at night. Key to achieving this goal is for parents to leave their child alone long enough for her to go to sleep.

7. Dress and room temperature. Again, there are no absolutes here, but a rule of thumb is to dress your child basically as you dress yourself, keeping in mind that younger children often kick off the covers at night and are unable to cover themselves. People generally sleep better in a cooler (but not cold) rather than warmer room.

8. Transitional object. Bedtime means separation, and that can be made easier with a transitional object, like a doll, teddy bear, blanket, or the like. This kind of object can provide a sense of security and control that comforts and reassures your child.

9. Room and bed sharing. Some parents may feel sharing their bedroom and/or bed with their child is more natural than having separate rooms, that it is important for emotional development. There may be cultural preferences as well.

From the point of view of obtaining uninterrupted sleep and considering various social and psychological issues, it is generally not a good idea. First, everyone sleeps better alone -- that is, we have fewer sleep disturbances and awakenings. Children in the same bed and/or bedroom also may not learn how to fall asleep themselves and tend to have sleep problems. Smothering is also a concern.

Having a child in the bed with you may also have serious effects on your intimacy and sex life. Leaving your child with a sitter may become an issue as well. The longer the

child sleeps in your bed, the more difficult it becomes to decide exactly when he or she should stop and eventually move into his own room. Sleeping separately is also important to help a child learn to separate without anxiety and form his or her own identity.

One last thing:

Kids will always have that one last thing -- kisses, hugs, a drink of water, using the bathroom. They can be quite inventive. Do your best to anticipate all this and get it done before getting in bed. And let your child know that once they are in bed, they have to stay in bed.