



Bedtime

Management of a Child's Bedtime Routine

If you have found that your child's bedtime routine has become longer and longer as he has gotten older, you are not alone – children love to spend time with a parent. But did you know a young child will fight to stay awake to be with a parent, and interact with that parent, even when she is sleepy? If you wait until your child asks to go to bed, it will be very late in most cases, and your child will become significantly sleep deprived. This is why you, as a parent, must set the bedtime. You can help your child draw a close to each day and obtain adequate sleep by establishing a pleasant and realistic bedtime routine that involves some firm rules.

The Bedtime Routine:

When we refer to the bedtime routine, we are really referring to the last 10 to 15 minutes – following the bath, snacks, putting on PJs and brushing teeth – just before a child goes to bed. This is the time when a child needs to have a relaxing, predictable, smooth, non-negotiable routine to make it easier for the child to say goodnight and to fall asleep.

Some children have a much easier time winding down if they say goodnight to just one parent at a time. Saying goodnight and having both parents leave the room at the same time can feel overwhelming to a child. Try to have the child say goodnight to one parent, then the other parent handles the bedtime routine. It seems to help to have the same parent in charge of the bedtime routine for several consecutive nights, then alternate.

For most children the bedtime routine must be precise - for example, three stories and one song. If left open-ended, a child will frequently insist on "one more." However, every family is different. It may involve reading or telling stories,

singing songs, saying prayers, etc., but it should be limited to 15 minutes or less. If a backrub is given to the child, limit it to the length of a song or poem.

The Bed and The Bedroom

- Small blankets designed to be used by a child, small stuffed toys or dolls, and pacifiers are appropriate to have in the bed.
- Avoid items that make sounds, wind-up, or come with lights or mirrors – they are not conducive to sleep.
- It is usually not wise to have several books or toys in the bed, as this sends the message that it's time to play or look at pictures. If the same one book is there each night, this may not be a problem. But decide what should be in the bed and stick with it for weeks.
- If absolutely necessary, a parent could suggest that the same items go in the bed each night for a week, then the child is allowed to exchange one item once a week.
- Avoid using a closet or hall light as a night light. Teach your child to sleep with only 1-2 dim night lights which plug in low to eye level.
- White noise is encouraged (vaporizer, air purifier, or noise machine).

**Sleep Medicine
& Research Center**

Prepared by Nancy Birkenmeier, BSN, RN,
Sleep Medicine and Research Center,
St. Luke's Hospital. This material may be copied
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Stalling

If your child has been in the habit of calling you back to the room after bedtime, consider the following: Just before saying goodnight, let your child know you have made a list of things to take care of before bedtime. Include “Here is your last drink” and “last bathroom trip.” Put lotion on the itch, fix the blanket, perform the perfect tuck-in session, give hugs and say your goodnights. Tell your child his/her sleep is very important to you and for that reason there are some rules:

- After bedtime, if you think of something to tell me, it must wait until morning. It’s not good for your sleep if I keep coming in to talk to you.
- After bedtime, if your blanket falls off, you can leave it off. Your pajamas are warm enough to go without a blanket. But I guess, you could put it back on if you thought you needed it. It’s not good for your sleep if I keep coming in to put your blanket on.
- If anything starts to bother you after bedtime, we can discuss it in the morning. It would not be good for your sleep for me to keep coming in your room to talk to you.

Let your child know that you have taken care of all his/her needs, and getting out of bed or calling out after bedtime is not good for sleep. Say “if you are walking or talking you can’t be sleeping.” Try NOT to say:

- “I’m really tired of coming in here. I have a lot of work to do and you are interrupting. You are being very inconsiderate” – this may upset the child further.
- “If you don’t sleep well we will not go/do _____ tomorrow” – a child cannot make himself sleep and your child is very likely to say she DID sleep well.
- “I know you’re tired” – this may invite an argument.
- “You can’t be thirsty/need to use the bathroom” – this may invite an argument

Does Your Child Stall?

Make a list of all the things your child uses as an excuse to delay bedtime. Some of the most common delay tactics are:

- I need a drink
- I’m hungry
- I need to go to the bathroom
- I’m not tired; I can’t sleep
- I need another kiss/hug/story
- I heard something; I’m scared
- I need (the opposite parent)
- Fix my blanket; my blanket “fell” off
- My _____ hurts/itches
- I forgot to tell you something

Strategies to Manage Stalling

If your child claims to be starving each night at bedtime, an hour or two before bedtime (or whenever you designate) make an announcement that the “kitchen will be closing in five minutes” and any snack needs to be chosen and consumed. If your child is taking forever to decide, limit the choice to two or three items. Consider saying “you have one more minute to decide – if you have not decided by then I will choose for you” or “the snack will be an apple.” Make sure what is offered is indeed a snack. It is especially important to limit size and choice of a snack to ensure that it doesn’t become a meal.

If your child stalls in choosing stories each evening, use similar strategies or consider: just before bath time, or another activity your child enjoys, say “it’s time to choose the books for tonight” so that your child will choose more quickly.

Enforcing the Rules

Now that you have established new rules, expect your child to test you to see “What will happen if I don’t follow the rules?” You must be committed to enforcing the rules and backing them up with action when necessary. One parent must be available as the “enforcer” for at least 7 to 10 consecutive days. It tends to go more smoothly if the first enforcer is the parent the child thinks is the firmer, sterner disciplinarian. Stick with one parent for several nights until bedtime is going smoothly, then alternate parents.

Once your child is in bed and you have left the room, one of you should remain nearby in the hallway or in an adjacent room. If your child comes out of the room or calls after bedtime, you’ll know right away. Walk your child back to bed and tuck them back in. If you are firm, unemotional and stay near the room, the hope is that your child will stay quietly in bed. If your child then calls out “I need to tell you something,” the go to the doorway saying “I hear you talking. That’s not good for your sleep. It’s time to be quiet. Goodnight”. Once your child is going to bed smoothly for several nights, there is no need you to be right outside your child’s door.

Many children at this point will stay in bed quietly, but many will not. When a child repeatedly comes out or calls out, the parent is put in the position of having to choose a method of enforcement. There are a number of ways to enforce the rules and a parent chooses a method based on the age, temperament and personality of the child as well as other factors. This can be an area of controversy; some argue that a parent should threaten to take privileges away from the child or some other type of punishment or consequence. Some argue that a reward system works best. Talk to your pediatrician or other professional if you are unsure what might be best for your child.