

Positive Parenting of Toddlers

Bedtime Problems

Children need a good night's sleep so that they have enough energy for the next day's activities. Parents also need adequate sleep and some child-free time to ensure their own needs are being met. Toddlers can learn to become more independent in their sleep routine and be less demanding than infants. The goal is for children to develop healthy, independent sleep patterns. This tip sheet gives some suggestions on how to help your toddler develop a good bedtime routine.

What Are Common Bedtime Problems?

One in three children under five years of age have sleep and bedtime problems. Common problems include:

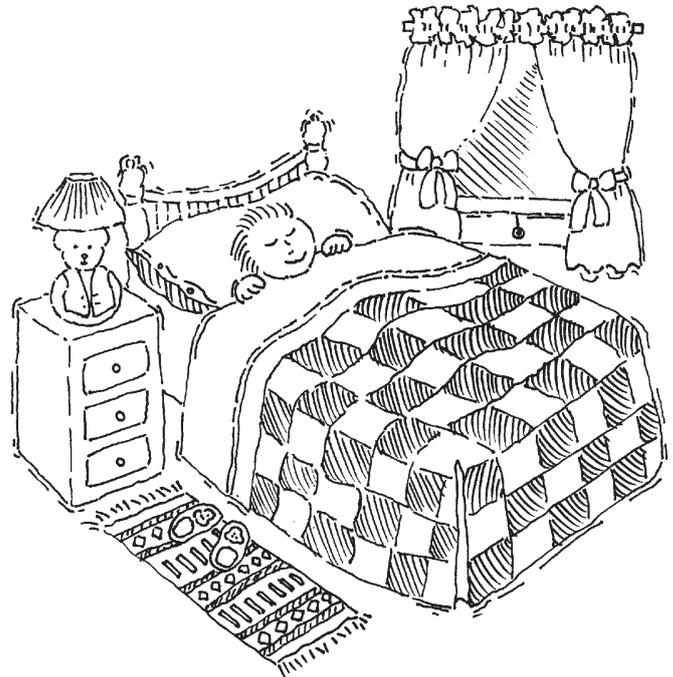
- Dawdling.
- Protesting and refusing to go to bed.
- Crying after being put to bed.
- Waking up in the middle of the night.
- Getting out of bed.
- Refusing to sleep in their own bed.

Why Do Bedtime Problems Occur?

As infants, many children are rocked to sleep or fed until they fall asleep. If this pattern becomes a habit children begin to need these conditions to get to sleep at bedtime, or when they wake during the night. Toddlers need to learn how to fall asleep by themselves.

Parents can accidentally encourage poor sleep habits. Consider the following example. You put your child to bed, read a story and say goodnight. As soon as you try to leave, your child starts to scream. If your child learns that screaming will bring you back to their room or make you take them out of their bed and into your bed, there is little incentive for them to stay quiet. The screaming pays off. Your child will not learn to fall asleep independently. If this pattern becomes a habit, you can expect the problem to continue.

Other sleeping problems may be temporary and follow an illness or other disruption to your child's normal routine, such as having to sleep in a strange bed. These



problems often correct themselves once the normal routine returns.

Most problems can be avoided by having a set routine and some rules. Although we cannot make a child go to sleep, we can put children to bed and organise conditions where sleep becomes more likely.

How To Establish a Bedtime Routine

Make Sure Your Child's Room Is Comfortable

The room should be well ventilated and the temperature constant. Use a night light if your child is afraid of the dark.

Set a Regular Bedtime

A common bedtime for toddlers is 7:30 p.m. but anywhere between 6:30 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. is reasonable.

Set Some Ground Rules with Your Child

Decide on some simple rules you would like your child to follow at bedtime. Here are some examples:

- Go to bed at the set time.
- Stay in your own bed until morning.
- Be quiet in your room (no calling out).

Remind Your Child that It Will Be Bedtime Soon

About 30 minutes before bedtime, tell your child they will be going to bed soon. Involve your child in quiet activities such as puzzles or colouring-in.

Finish Pre-Bedtime Activities

About ten minutes before bedtime, tell your child to finish what they are doing. Help your child with teeth, toilet and other getting ready for bed tasks such as saying goodnight to other family members. You may like to make up a poster with pictures to remind your child of the steps in their bedtime routine.

Put Your Child to Bed and Check Your List

If your child is in bed by the set time, read a story or sing some songs. Then go through the excuses your child may use to get out of bed. Your list may include:

- Have you cleaned your teeth?
- Have you said goodnight to everyone?
- Have you been to the toilet?
- Have you had a drink?

Say Goodnight and Leave

Remind your child of the rules. Say goodnight and leave decisively. Ignore any requests or complaints.

How To Encourage Your Child To Stay Quietly in Bed

Use this step if your child has trouble accepting a new bedtime routine. The goal is for your child to stay in bed and learn to fall asleep by themselves—without being held, rocked, nursed, or using a bottle or dummy.

Remind Your Child To Stay Quiet

Tell your child what will happen if they stay in bed—*If you stay in bed and do not call out, I will come back to check that you are OK.* Check that your child understands. Leave decisively. Ignore any requests or complaints.

Praise Your Child

Wait two minutes. If your child stays quiet, return and praise them in a soft voice—*You're doing really well lying quietly in your bed.* Stay no more than 30 seconds. Tell your child you will come back again if they continue to stay quietly in bed. Wait five minutes before praising them again. Continue this routine, gradually increasing the length of time that you stay out

of your child's room. You may need to do this four or five times before your child falls asleep. Leave quietly if you return and find your child asleep.

How To Manage Problems at Bedtime

Learning a new routine at bedtime can be difficult at first and some protesting is inevitable. You can use either a direct or gradual approach to deal with bedtime problems. Choose the approach you feel most comfortable with. Both of these routines require extra time and effort at first. Read the instructions for each approach carefully before you decide which one to use. It is important that both parents (where applicable) agree. You must want a solution and be prepared to follow through with the chosen approach.

Choose a time to start when you are not stressed, perhaps a Friday night. Parents can work together or with another support person when they start using a new approach. If you are concerned that crying will disturb your neighbours, you may like to explain what you are doing. Remember, you often need to put up with a short period of even greater difficulty before improvement occurs.

Direct Approach

Your child is likely to protest before they learn how to fall asleep independently. It is best for your child if you do not respond at all to these protests. This will not harm your child. In fact, they will quickly learn how to fall asleep by themselves. If you use this approach, do not go in to your child, even to check if they are alright. If you feel you need to check, the gradual approach may be more appropriate for you (see below).

Remind Your Child of the Rules and Leave

Go through the steps for setting up a bedtime routine as listed above. Before you say goodnight to your child, let them know what will happen if they follow the rules—*If you stay in bed and do not call out, there will be a surprise for you in the morning. If you call out or cry, I will not answer you, even if you shout. If you get out of your room, I will put you back and close the door.* Check that your child understands. Say goodnight and leave decisively. Ignore any requests or complaints.

Ignore All Noise (Calling Out and Crying)

Do not say anything and do not go back to your child. Be prepared for your child to cry. On the first night, children can cry anywhere from a few minutes to

several hours. You must be prepared to let them cry themselves to sleep. If you go in to your child, you can actually make it worse—your child can learn to cry longer and louder to get your attention.

If your child shares a bedroom with another child and is disturbing their sleep, the children will need to be separated. If possible, move your other child into another room while your toddler learns how to fall asleep independently. After about a week, your children will be able to share a room again.

Be Consistent

If you start using this approach, stick with it. Ignore your child if they call out or cry. Remind yourself that no harm will come to your child. In fact, your child will soon learn to go to bed happily and sleep independently.

Keep a Sleep Diary

A sleep diary shows the progress your child makes. Record how long your child cries each night before falling asleep. After seven days, most children will have learnt to fall asleep without crying or protesting. The first few days are the hardest.

Gradual Approach

This technique provides an opportunity for you to check on your child and to reassure yourself that they are alright. Follow the steps for setting up a bedtime routine as described earlier. Say goodnight to your child and leave.

When Your Child Cries, Wait Before You Return

If your child cries when you leave, do not respond straight away. After five minutes, you may return, pat your child gently as they lie in their bed and remind them that it is time to go to sleep. Pat them for a minute then leave. Your goal is to reassure your child and yourself, not necessarily to help them stop crying and certainly not to stay until they fall asleep. After one minute, leave your child, even if they are still crying.

Wait a Little Longer Before Returning to Your Child

Gradually extend the amount of time in between your checkups. Always wait two minutes longer than the last time—wait five minutes, then seven, nine, eleven minutes and so on before returning to your child. You may choose not to check again if your child is beginning to quieten.

Keep To Your Time Schedule

A clock can be used to help you follow your schedule. Stay no more than one minute at each checkup. Leave your child after each checkup even if they are still crying at the end of the minute.

Keep a Sleep Diary

Record how long it takes for your child to fall asleep each night. After ten days, your child will probably be sleeping well.

What To Do if Your Child Gets Out of Bed

Constantly getting out of bed can be a problem when children have moved out of their cot and into a bed.

Return Your Child to Bed

Stay calm. Immediately return your child to their bed if they come out of their room—*Jake, you are not to come out of your room. Now, go back to bed.* Ignore all protests.

Close Your Child's Bedroom Door if They Come Out Again

If your child comes out again, take them back and either close the door or use another obstacle such as a child gate—*Jake you haven't stayed in your room, now I am going to close your door.* Open the door when your child has been quiet for two minutes. Repeat this step every time your child comes out of their room. Take your child back to bed and close the door until your child is quiet for another two minutes. Your child will learn that it is nicer to stay in their room with the door open rather than closed. Calmly closing the door is much better than repeated threats or smacks.

If you cannot, or choose not to close your child's bedroom door, immediately return your child to their bed every time they come out of their room. Stay calm and do not talk to your child. You may need to do this many times before your child falls asleep.

What To Do When Your Child Gets into Bed With You

If your child wanders during the night, especially into your bed, immediately return them to their own bed. Spend no more than 30 seconds settling your child. If your child comes to your bed again, immediately take them back to their own bed. This time close your door. You can lock your door or put a wedge under it to stop your child from opening it. Expect your child to protest

when they cannot get in. Ignore all protests—do not answer. Another option is to close your child's door and again ignore all protests.

If your child gets into your bed without you waking, you may find it helpful to put a pillow down the middle of the bed, between yourself and your partner. This makes it likely that they will roll into one of you, waking you up. As soon as you find your child in your bed, take them back to their own bed.

What To Do When Your Child Cries During the Night

If your toddler is not in pain or ill, give very little attention to them if they cry during the night. Too much play or comfort can look like you are encouraging crying and can often mean more problems in the future. Use either the direct or gradual approach described above. Use the same approach every night.

Reward Your Child's Success

If your child follows the rules and stays quietly in their bedroom all night, you can have a surprise reward for them in the morning. Suggested rewards include choosing a special breakfast cereal, a small toy, stickers or stamps. Praise your child for following the rules. A behaviour chart for stickers or stamps hung on the back of your child's door can provide extra motivation. If your child called out or came out of their room, they miss out on the reward this time.

Key Steps

Establish a Bedtime Routine

- Set a regular, predictable bedtime.
- Set some rules for the bedtime routine.
- Involve your child in quiet activities 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Take your child to bed at the set time and check your list.
- Say goodnight and leave.

Encourage Your Child To Stay Quietly in Bed

- Tell your child that you will check on them if they stay quietly in bed.
- Praise your child for staying quiet in bed.
- Gradually increase the amount of time between checkups.
- Continue this routine until your child falls asleep.

Deal with Problem Behaviour Immediately and Consistently

Direct Approach

- Remind your child of the rules.
- Say goodnight and leave.
- Ignore your child's calls and crying.
- Keep a sleep diary to track progress.

Gradual Approach

- Delay responding to your child if they cry.
- Gradually extend the amount of time in between your checkups.
- Leave your child after one minute, even if they are still crying.
- Keep a sleep diary to track progress.

Other Tips

- Return your child to bed if they come out or get into bed with you.
- Give little attention to crying during the night.
- Reward your child in the morning.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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