



Putting Nighttime Problems to Bed

By Jeffrey S. Katz, Ph.D.

I see a number of families that are struggling with nighttime issues. Mild sleep disturbances are not unusual in children, especially when they are around 2-years-old, and then again between the ages of 3 and 5. Sleep disturbances may be prompted by a number of factors including anxiety, physical disorders, over stimulation, situational stress, fear of the dark and fear of losing control. For very young children, bedtime means separation from Mom and Dad, a very scary predicament. And oftentimes, children are afraid that something may happen to themselves or their parents while they are asleep. Older children generally have more specific worries such as a burglar or a fire.

There are times when parents contribute to nighttime problems such as when bedtime is used as a form of punishment. When this happens, children then associate going to sleep with punishment. When punishment needs to be enforced, it is best to find other consequences to apply. Leave the bedtime routine intact.

If you want to conquer nighttime issues, the first step to take is to realize that almost all children will go through periods when they resist going to sleep. Accepting that fact will help prevent you from becoming upset when incidents occur. If you let the situation get the better of you, it will only make the problem worse. Overall, the best approach is

prevention, that is, having strategies in place that can prevent problems before they start.

A regular routine must first be established. Set times every day when your child will go to bed and get up in the morning. This is important even during the summer months. Maintaining a routine helps keep the situation under control during the school year, and a regular routine helps a child become psychologically ready for sleep. Adults behave very much the same way. How many times have you fallen asleep early on a Saturday night because you are so used to going to sleep early during the work week? Bedtimes and wake-up times can be changed occasionally, but try not to break your child's routine unless it's a special occasion.

A period of quiet time before bed is also a good idea. Quiet time is a period when roughhousing and projects are put aside. Some families do best when they shut off the television about thirty minutes before bedtime. This helps the youngster settle down and eases the transition to bedtime. It may also be helpful to give your child advance notice that bedtime or quiet time is coming up in five to 10 minutes. This allows your child to prepare for the transition.

Use bedtime as an opportunity to spend quality time with your child. A routine of reading together or lying in bed talking about the day not only helps ease the transition to



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bed, but also gives you a chance to hear what's on your little one's mind. Spending a few minutes with your child at bedtime can be a pleasurable and relaxing time for both of you.

If your youngster says he can't get to sleep, let him know that you expect him to rest, read or play quietly in his room until sleep comes. It is not necessary, or helpful, to insist that your child fall asleep immediately as he has little control over that. Usually, children take up to a half-hour before actually falling asleep. If necessary, you can set a time in the evening when lights must be out.

If your child pops in and out of his room every two minutes or so after you leave, it is important to manage his behavior. One suggestion is to give your youngster five or six marbles, pennies or any other item that he can "pay" you with every time he leaves his room or calls you back. If he has any of them left in the morning, he earns a prize. The prize

could be quarters or a small piece of candy or anything that will motivate your child. Make sure he gets the reward first thing in the morning to reinforce how well he did.

This system won't stop your child from leaving his room or calling you back, but it will help control the situation. He may think a little bit more about leaving the room if he has to "pay" up. And since your child has some control over the situation, he is much less likely to feel abandoned.

A child's resistance to going to bed is a normal part of growing up. Establishing a routine will help prevent bedtime from becoming a power struggle between the two of you. Remember, bedtime should be a time when your child can feel relaxed, safe and content with himself and his day.



About the Author

Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D., is a child, adolescent, and adult psychologist and leading expert in the field of ADHD, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. He is also a foremost consultant and sought after speaker for numerous medical, academic, business and legal professionals and organizations. Throughout his career, Dr. Katz has been interviewed by many print, radio and TV outlets and served as a regular columnist for *Tidewater Parent* magazine. He is also co-author of the recently released book *365 +1 Ways to Succeed with ADHD*. A graduate of the California School of Professional Psychology, Dr. Katz has been in private practice in the Hampton Roads, Virginia area for more than 25 years.

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