

# Bedtime Problems

Children need a good night's sleep so 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 5 years of age has sleep and bedtime problems. Common problems include:

- Going slowly.
- 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 HAPPEN?

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 are learning how to fall asleep independently.

Parents can accidentally encourage poor sleep habits. Consider the following example. You put your child to bed, read a story and say goodnight. When 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 reason for them to stay quiet. If screaming gets your child what they want, it is likely to continue and your child will not learn to fall asleep independently.

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.

## HOW TO HELP PREVENT PROBLEMS AT BEDTIME

### ▼ Make Sure the Room Is Comfortable

Your child's 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 pm, but anywhere between 6.30 pm and 8.00 pm is reasonable.

### ▼ Establish a Bedtime Routine

Develop a routine for going to bed. Explain it to your child. Here is an example:

- Go to the toilet.
- Clean your teeth.
- Say goodnight.
- Go to bed at the set time.
- Be quiet in your bedroom (no calling out).
- Stay in your own bed until morning.



### ▼ Prepare Your Child Ahead of Time

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.

About 10 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.

### ▼ Take Your Child to Bed and Check Your List

Put your child into bed and go through the excuses they 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?

If your child is settled in bed by the set time, you may like to read a story or sing some songs.

### ▼ Say Goodnight and Leave

When you are ready to leave, say goodnight and leave decisively. Ignore any requests or complaints.

### ▼ Encourage Desirable Behaviour

In the morning, praise your child for following the steps of the bedtime routine. At first, you may also like to reward your child for following the bedtime routine and staying quietly in their room all night. Have a surprise ready for them in the morning. Suggested rewards include choosing

a special breakfast cereal, a small toy, stickers or stamps. A behaviour chart for stickers or stamps hung beside your child's bed can provide extra motivation. If your child called out or came out of their room, don't give the reward this time.

### HOW TO TEACH YOUR CHILD TO STAY QUIETLY IN BED

Use this strategy 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.

#### ▼ Explain What Will Happen

Tell your child what will happen if they stay quietly 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 2 minutes. If your child stays quietly in bed, 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 5 minutes before returning and praising them again. Continue this routine, gradually increasing the 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.

If your child does not stay quietly in bed, choose one of the approaches suggested below.

### HOW TO MANAGE PROBLEMS AT BEDTIME

Learning a new routine at bedtime can be difficult and your child is likely to protest at first. It is up to you to decide if there is a problem you would like to work on. You can choose your own approach to dealing with bedtime problems. Choose the approach you feel most comfortable with. 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 to solve a bedtime problem and be prepared to follow through with the chosen

approach. Sleeping difficulties may get worse if parents begin a program without adequate preparation or start a program then stop and restart it. If you have any questions or concerns, seek professional advice before you begin.

You must be ready to start a new bedtime routine too. This means being able to be consistent and use the same approach every day. You cannot do it one day but not the next. It is best to start when the whole family is relaxed and not under extra stress. Choose a time to start when you do not have to be up early the next day, such as 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 your child learns to go to sleep without help.

#### GENTLE APPROACH

This technique, sometimes called camping out, can be used for young toddlers who have trouble falling asleep on their own. It can be used to encourage your child to settle at night and during daytime rests. Put your child in their cot or bed at a regular time. Say goodnight and lie down in another bed or chair in the same room. Avoid eye contact and don't talk to your child. Pretend to be asleep until your child falls asleep and then leave the room. If your child wakes, return and pretend to be asleep until your child goes back to sleep. You may like to sleep in the same room as your child for the first few nights. If your child cries or screams, do not attend to them unless they are ill or in danger. You can gradually move the bed or chair further towards the door and out of the room over successive nights.

#### GRADUAL APPROACH

This technique, sometimes called control comforting, can be used for children over 6 months and less than 2 years of age. It provides an opportunity for you to leave your child to fall asleep and check on them to reassure yourself that they are all right. Follow the steps for preventing bedtime problems as described earlier. Say goodnight to your child and leave.

#### ▼ Wait Before You Return to Your Child

If your child cries when you leave, don't respond right away. Give them a chance to settle themselves. If they don't, return after 2 minutes, pat your child gently as they lie in their bed and quietly remind them that it is time to go to sleep.

Your goal is to reassure your child and yourself, not necessarily to help them stop crying and not to stay until they fall asleep. After 1 minute, leave your child, even if they are still crying.

Gradually extend the amount of time in between your checkups. Always wait 2 minutes longer than the last time — wait 2 minutes, then 4, 6, 8 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 1 minute at each checkup. Leave your child after each checkup even if they are still crying.

#### ▼ Keep Track

You may like to use a sleep diary to keep track of the progress your child makes. Record how long it takes for your child to fall asleep each night. After 10 days, your child will probably be sleeping well.

#### DIRECT APPROACH

Children are likely to call out and protest before they learn how to fall asleep without help if they are used to it. If you use this approach and do not respond to these protests, your child will learn how to fall asleep on their own. This direct approach means you simply do not go to your child once you have said goodnight and left them to fall asleep. If you feel you need to check on your child, the gradual approach may be more appropriate for you.

#### ▼ Explain What Will Happen

Follow the steps for preventing bedtime problems suggested earlier. Before you say goodnight to your child, let them know what will happen if they stay in their room until morning — *If you stay in your bed all night, 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 come 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.

#### ▼ Use Planned Ignoring

Do not say anything to your child and do not go back into their room. Be prepared for your child to cry or call out. On the first night, this may happen for a long time. You must be prepared to let them settle themselves and go to sleep without your help. If you go to your child, you can actually make things worse — your child may learn to cry longer and louder to get your attention.

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. Your child will soon learn to go to bed happily and fall asleep independently.

#### ▼ Keep Track

You may like to use a sleep diary to keep track of the progress your child makes. Record how long your child calls out or cries each night before falling asleep. After 7 days, most children will have learned to fall asleep without crying or protesting. The first few days are the hardest. Remember, calling out or getting out of bed is not always a problem. Your child might really need something. Use your judgement and go to your child if you think something is wrong.

### 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.* If necessary, pick your child up and carry them back to their bed. Ignore all protests.

#### ▼ Close the Door or Keep Returning Them

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 2 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 2 minutes. Your child will learn that it is better to stay in their room with the door open rather than closed.

If you cannot or choose not to close the 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 comes into your bed during the night, 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 may like to 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 (where applicable). This makes it likely that your child 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 accidentally reward crying and can mean more problems in the future. Use the direct, gradual or gentle approach described above. Use the same approach every night.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

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 arrange conditions where sleep becomes more likely.

If your child shares a room 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.

### KEY STEPS

#### Prevent Problems at Bedtime

- Set a regular bedtime.
- Establish a bedtime routine.
- Involve your child in quiet activities 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Help your child complete the steps of the bedtime routine.
- At the set time, take your child to bed and check your list.
- Say goodnight and leave.
- Praise and reward your child in the morning if they follow the bedtime routine.

#### Teach 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 quietly in bed.
- Gradually increase the amount of time between checkups.
- Continue checking until your child falls asleep.

#### Deal with Bedtime Problems Consistently Gentle Approach

- Lie down in another bed near your child and pretend to be asleep until your child falls asleep.
- Do not attend to your child unless they are ill or in danger.

#### Gradual Approach

- Delay responding to your child if they cry.
- Gradually extend the amount of time in between your checkups.
- Leave your child after 1 minute, even if they are still crying.

#### Direct Approach

- Completely ignore your child's calls and crying — don't talk to them or return to their room.

#### Other Tips

- Return your child to their bed if they come out or get into bed with you.
- Give little attention to crying or calling out during the night.
- Keep a sleep diary to track progress.

As your child develops a good bedtime routine, you will not need to remind them of the steps every night. Even though you will discuss the steps less often, they will still apply. Be consistent with the approach you choose to use. Gradually make rewards less predictable by giving them every now and then. Continue to praise your child for following the bedtime routine and staying quietly in their bed until morning.

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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