

LET'S GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

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One of the greatest challenges some parents face is getting their children to sleep – alone, in their own beds, and through the night. Parents complain that their children resist going to bed, cry and yell from the bedroom, leave their bed or room repeatedly, and sometimes end up sleeping with their parents. When this is the typical evening pattern, children and parents get too little sleep and fatigue affects the mood, health, and daily functioning of the entire family.

There are a variety of possible reasons why children have sleep disturbances. Some contributing factors may be medical (e.g., breathing, gastrointestinal issues). For that reason, a consultation with a pediatrician is typically a sensible first step. More often, however, sleep problems can be tied to environmental and behavioral issues. For example, a child might be too stimulated by his surroundings to rest, uncomfortable in his bedroom, and/or seeking the attention and “drama” he produces through nighttime disruptions. In these cases, there are a variety of practical strategies that may improve children's sleep. Here are some ideas:

Make the surrounding comfortable (but also boring)

- * Reduce the stimulation in the child's bedroom by removing toys, books, and other items that might be distracting or entertaining.
- * Allow the child something comforting (e.g., stuffed animal, special pillow or blanket, article of clothing, soft, non-interactive toy) to hold in bed.
- * Consider playing soft music or white noise to drown out other sounds in the house.
- * Turn the lights down low, but provide a night light if desired by the child.

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Create a consistent, calming bedtime routine

Establish consistent bedtime routine with time limits for each activity designed to calm the child and make the transition to bed. For example,

- Turn technology (TV, video games) off at 7:00 p.m.
- Shower, brush teeth, and put dirty clothes away
- Say good night to other family members and go into bedroom
- Lie in bed and read or tell stories, specifying how many pages or length of time
- Hug/kiss/snuggle (e.g., “one big squeeze” and say good night
(It often helps to use song or dialogue to end these interactions)

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Teach and encourage appropriate resting behavior

Remind the child that he must go into his bedroom, lie down, and go to sleep by himself. He will remain in his room all night, soothing himself if he awakens at night as needed to he can return to sleep. If necessary, teach the child self-soothing strategies such as deep breathing, making mental lists, or squeezing his bedtime companion. Tell him that you will be checking on him and helping him to rest quietly, provided he remains in his bed and quiet.

Manage nighttime interruptions, without rewarding them

Periodically praise the child quietly for resting quietly (how often you check on the child is based on how long he currently remains in his bed).

For every (---) minutes he remains in his bed, snuggle (e.g., rub his back) or talk to him briefly and let him know you will keep checking on him. Allow the child to keep his comfort objects if he is resting quietly.

Listen carefully for the child at night and go to him if he needs something – rather than allowing him to come to you.

If the child gets out of his bed, guide him back immediately. Say simply, “You must sleep in your own bed” and provide no other attention or affection.

Reward the child for remaining in his bed during the week with special privileges (e.g., watching a movie with the parents, co-sleeping one night per week)

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Gradually increase expectations for independent sleep



Remain in child’s room or close by initially and then begin fading out your presence to the hall to other areas of the house as he becomes more independent.

Gradually extend the amount of time the child must remain quiet and in his bed for you to return to snuggle and talk to him. As with any behavioral support strategies, the specific approaches for improving sleep should be tailored to the child’s and family’s needs and the circumstances surrounding the child’s behavior. It is important to be both supportive and firm. Consistency between parents and other caretakers and over time is a key to success. With the right strategies, everyone in the family will ultimately get more rest.

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