

Bedtime Problems

**Children benefit from the structure of limits that you set for them.
Limits relieve (not cause) anxiety in children.**

Getting a child to go to bed is a common problem for many parents. Some children use stalling and excuses to resist going to bed, whereas others go to bed but do not stay there. Bedtime can be one of the most trying parts of a parent's day. Bedtime problems can occur at any age but are most common between 3 and 6 years.

What can you do to help your child go to bed?

First of all, it is important to realize that you cannot "make" a child go to sleep. However, you can help your child improve their bedtime behavior and help them to get to sleep more easily and quickly. As with many other skills your child needs to learn, this will take time.

Create the bedtime plan

Stick to firm bedtime limits

- Believe that setting and sticking to firm bedtime limits is best for everyone, especially your child.
 - Setting limits is an important part of parenting. Children do not have a lot of self-control yet, and so they benefit from the structure of limits that you set for them. This helps them to learn self-control. Also, limits relieve (not cause) anxiety in children.
 - Prepare yourself for some hard work. Changing behavior is always difficult. Your child is probably happy with bedtime the way it is and so will initially have little motivation to change. You need to be consistent and persistent.
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Explain the new rules to your child

- Before you start the new nighttime program, sit down with your child during the day and let them know what you expect.
 - Do not make your conversation too long or involved and do not over explain.
 - Ignore any negative comments by your child and avoid arguing about the new rules.
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Set bedtime

- Decide on your child's bedtime and be consistent about it.
 - Set a regular bedtime to help set your child's internal clock.
 - Be sure that your child is ready for sleep before putting them to bed. This may seem obvious, but sometimes parents set a bedtime for their own convenience. Some children's biological clocks make them more likely to be "night owls." These children may have difficulty with an earlier bedtime.
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Bedtime fading

Putting children to bed when they are not tired increases the likelihood of bedtime struggles. For some children it is best to start by setting the bedtime at the time they usually fall asleep and gradually make (fade in) the bedtime earlier. To start this:

- First determine when your child is naturally falling asleep and set this as their temporary bedtime. If you would like your child to go to bed at 8:30, but they usually do not fall asleep until 10:30, choose 10:30 as their temporary bedtime to start.
This will make it easier to teach your child how to fall asleep within a short time of getting into bed.
- Once your child is falling asleep easily and quickly at their temporary bedtime then you can start making their bedtime earlier by 15 minutes every few days.
- Be patient. If you move the bedtime back too quickly, you may have problems with your child not being able to fall asleep.

Bedtime routine

Establish a consistent bedtime routine.

- Choose calm and enjoyable activities, such as a bath and bedtime stories.
- Avoid stimulating high-energy activities, such as playing outside, running around, or watching exciting television shows or videos.
- Having the last part of the bedtime routine be a favorite activity will help motivate your child to get ready for bed.
- Make a chart of your bedtime routine to help keep your child on track.

Ignore complaints or protests

Ignore your child's complaints or protests about bedtime, such as not being tired. Discussing or arguing about bedtime will lead to a struggle with your child, thus maintaining bedtime problems. Firmly and calmly let your child know it is time for bed and continue with the routine.

Putting your child to bed

When the bedtime routine is complete, put your child to bed and leave the room. It is important that you leave the room while your child is awake, as this helps your child learn to fall asleep on their own.

If your child cries or yells

- If your child is yelling or calling out to you but remaining in their bed, remind them one time that it is bedtime.
- If your child continues to be upset, check on them. Wait for as long or short a time as you wish. For some children, checking frequently is effective; for others, checking infrequently works better.
- Continue returning to check on your child as long as they are crying or upset.
- The visits should be brief (1 minute) and boring.
- Don't soothe or comfort your child during these visits and don't get into a discussion. Calmly tell your child that it's time to go to sleep. The purpose of returning to the room is to reassure your child that you are still present and to reassure you that your child is OK.

Bedtime Problems

If your child gets out of bed or comes out of their room

- If your child gets out of bed or comes out of their room, firmly and calmly return them to bed. For some children, simply returning them to bed multiple times works. For others, letting them know that if they get up again you will close the bedroom door can be effective.
- If your child gets out of bed, put them back in bed and close the door for a brief period (1 minute to start).
- After the allotted time, open the door.
- If your child is in bed, praise them and leave the door open. If they are up, put them back in bed and close the door again but leave it closed for a longer time, increasing the time by a few minutes each time he gets up.

Don't lock your child in their room

Locking the door may be scary for your child. The goal is to teach your child to stay in bed, not punish or scare them.

Reward your child

- Soon after your child awakens in the morning, reward them for what they did well the night before.
- Don't dwell on misbehavior from the previous night.
- Give your attention to your child's successes. Stickers, praise, and breakfast treats are good ways to reward your child for even small improvements.

Be consistent and don't give up

The first few nights are likely to be very challenging. You should start to see major improvements within the first few weeks.

Try not to lose your temper

Although it is natural to feel angry when your child misbehaves or won't cooperate at bedtime, try to remain cool and calm. Your goal is to make bedtime a positive and secure time of the day for your child.

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Guidelines for Average Hours of Sleep

Age of child Hours of Sleep Each Day

Birth to 3 months ...	16 hours
6 to 12 months	13 to 14 hours
1 to 3 years	12 hours
3 to 5 years	11 to 12 hours
5 to 12 years	10 to 11 hours
Adolescence	8.5 to 9.5 hours

Owens, J. (2006) Pediatric Insomnia, Sleep Medicine Clinics, v1, issue 3