Parenting Exchange
Bedtime #3 Library

by Karen Stephens

Tips for Helping Kids Beat the Bedtime Blues

It's not unusual for children to occasionally resist naps and bedtime. But some chronically avoid sleep; they try to call the shots about bedtime every chance they get. Some parents make it easy for kids to fall into poor sleep habits. Parents who give in to kids' sleep avoidance help create sleep problems that undermine kids' well-being.

Bedtime should be a parent's decision based on their child's age and individual sleep needs. Handing over the bedtime decision to children is not only a bad idea, it's neglectful. We'd never tell children they could eat — or not, brush teeth — or not, dress — or not, have their immunizations — or not. Why would parents tell kids they can go to bed — or not?

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I suspect it's because parents know that kids will eventually give up and zonk out. After all, a child's body can only go so long without sleep. And so parents who have too little patience, who are too tired themselves, or feel guilt about not spending enough time with their child just wait out the ultimate conclusion. The result is often that kids fall asleep late at night on the floor in front of a flickering television. Sometimes they are carried to bed later, sometimes not. It doesn't sound like a comforting and cared for childhood, does it?

In the short run it might be easier for parents to let kids stay up until they drop, but it's not responsible parenting. It doesn't teach children wise ways for living. It doesn't help them establish the self-discipline they'll need to maintain health throughout life. And letting kids stay up all hours doesn't give parents the *childfree* downtime they need in order to be a better parent.

Sadly, it's not uncommon for me to hear of preschoolers staying up past 11 p.m. — and I'm talking weeknights, not weekends. Tired parents say they can't take their child's whining, so they let their little one stay up for one more movie and hope she'll fall asleep on the couch. The result is a child sleeping away the next morning or (worse) dragging into child care or school tired and fuzzyheaded. The day after inadequate sleep isn't pretty. It's harder for kids to reign in impulsive or short-tempered behavior. They end up having tedious and unnecessary scuffles with peers and adults. And the kids struggle with new learning challenges, too.

So, whether kids like it or not, it's in their best interest for parents to maintain sound bedtime practices. If that's a problem in your home, think about the following typical reasons kids experience the bedtime blues. By analyzing the cause behind your child's bedtime resistance, you might be able to come up with some reasonable solutions.

Typical Causes of Bedtime Problems

- **Parents' unrealistic expectations for kids' sleep needs.** Infants need up to 17 hours a day, preschoolers' sleep needs lessen to 11 to 12 hours a day. I've heard of some adults who only need 4 to 5 hours of sleep a night; I've absolutely never heard of that for growing children. (See our column

"Good sleep and bedtime habits nourish kids" for a list of children's estimated sleep needs.)

- **Inconsistent bedtime and morning wake up times.** Kids should go to sleep and wake up about the same time each and every day — with few exceptions.
- **Too late bedtime.** If bedtime is too late, move it to an earlier time in gradual increments. Kids going to bed 15 minutes earlier every two or three days will help you meet your ultimate bedtime goal.
- **Lack of predictable bedtime routines.** Bath, tooth brushing, pajamas, drink, story and one kiss, and cuddle goodnight sets up reliable cues for sleep at bedtime.
- **Parents give in too easily to tricks and manipulation.** If your child wants 10 "one more" drinks of water or goodnight kisses, it's time for you to be more firm and matter-of-fact. Kids play parents for dunces as long as parents allow it. One drink, one kiss, and then goodnight and leave the room.
- **Environmental intrusions.** Bright street lights or nearby building lights can interfere with sleep. Pull drapes, especially during daylight savings time, to help kids' bodies respond correctly to bedtime. For very sensitive kids, even new sheets or blankets can temporarily disrupt sleep.
- **Overexcitement just prior to bedtime.** Avoid active or stimulating play prior to bed.
- **Too long daytime naps.** Some kids need only a half or one hour nap, not two or three hours. Observe behavior to see which category your child is in.
- **Fear of missing out on family fun.** Be courteous. During the first half hour of your child's sleep, keep family life quiet. Kids love to be part of things. If it seems like the fun just starts when they go to bed, no wonder they resist bedtime.
- **Active imagination.** To a child (or me), a shadowed shirt hanging on a chair, in the corner of a dark room, looks a lot like a monster or an invading stranger. If your child imagines such danger, turn the light on once to check for it. Then turn lights out and give a quick good night. Night lights and doors left ajar with a hall light on help.
- **Realistic fears.** Kids today are bombarded with visual images of violence. Some see it right in their own homes between people they love. Fear of being alone or fear of what fighting family members are doing to each other prevents kids' sleep. Stop the cause of fears to restore the calm that will allow sleep.
- **Fear of being alone.** Some kids need extra assurance that you are nearby. If a child wakes up and cries, go in and check on them to offer reassurance. Give a pat on the shoulder, kiss on the forehead, or sit in a nearby chair. However, avoid picking kids up and getting them out of bed. It can distract them from sleep. Once they are reassured you are nearby, they must learn to get themselves back to sleep.
- **Life changes.** Parent separation or divorce, a new stepparent or stepsibling, family or pet death, or an ordinary household move can temporarily disrupt bedtime and sleep patterns. Starting a new school or having a sibling go away to college can, too. During life changes, provide kids plenty of quality time for listening and reassurance.
- **Parent-child power struggles.** Parents can't make kids sleep. If kids want to challenge parents or get back at them for some reason, a handy power point is bedtime. If your child needs, wants, or demands more bedtime control, offer reasonable opportunities for choice. Children may choose which pajamas to wear, which story to read, and which stuffed animal to sleep with; however, they don't get to choose when bedtime occurs or where they will sleep.

If your child resists bedtime, withhold decision-making as a consequence of uncooperative behavior. For toddlers and older children, if a child throws a screaming temper tantrum, leave the room and wait it out until they fall asleep. Don't bribe or beg them to stop. Once cooperation is resumed another night, allow them to make decisions again. Chronic, endless power struggles can suggest bigger family relationship problems. If that is the case, problem solve other family issues to reduce bedtime challenges.

For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at www.ChildCareExchange.com.

- Bedtime related articles #1, #2, #4, #5
- Power Struggles related articles — Test Rules

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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