

Bedtime Problems


Getting a child to go to bed is a common problem that many parents experience. Some children use stalling and excuses to resist going to bed, whereas others go to bed initially but do not stay there. Bedtime problems can be one of the most frustrating parts of a parent's day. Bedtime problems can occur at any age but are most prevalent 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 his bedtime behavior and help him to get to sleep more easily and quickly. As with many other skills your child needs to learn, this will take time.

- **Stick to firm bedtime limits.** The first step is to be convinced that your child needs to change his bedtime behavior, and that setting and sticking to firm bedtime limits is in everyone's best interest, especially your child's. 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. In addition, limits relieve (not cause) anxiety in children. Finally, 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.
- **Explain the new rules to your child.** Before you start the new nighttime program, sit down with your child during the day and let him know what you expect. Do not make your conversation too long or involved and do not overexplain. Ignore any negative comments by your child and avoid arguing about the new rules.
- **Set bedtime.** Once you have decided on your child's bedtime, be *consistent* about it. Establish a regular bedtime to help set your child's internal clock. Be sure that your child is ready for sleep before putting him to bed. This may seem obvious, but sometimes parents set a bedtime for their own convenience. For example, some children's biological clocks make them more likely to be “night owls.” These children may have difficulty with an earlier bedtime.
- **Bedtime fading.** Putting children to bed when they are not tired increases the likelihood of bedtime struggles. Therefore, for some children it is best to start by setting the bedtime at the time they usually fall asleep and gradually make the bedtime earlier. When you start, you will first need to determine when your child is naturally falling asleep and set this as his *temporary* bedtime. If you would like your child to go to bed at 8:30, but he usually does not fall asleep until 10:30, choose 10:30 as his temporary bedtime. This will make it easier to teach your child how to fall asleep within a short time of getting into bed. Once he is falling asleep easily and quickly at his temporary bedtime then you can start making his 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.

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- **Bedtime routine.** Be sure to establish a consistent bedtime routine. A bedtime routine should include 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. Make a chart of your bedtime routine to help keep your child on track. Also, having the last part of the bedtime routine be a favorite activity will help motivate your child to get ready for bed.
- **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 his own.
- **If your child cries or yells.** If your child is yelling or calling out to you but remaining in his bed, remind him one time that it is bedtime. If he continues to be upset, check on your child. Wait for as long or short a time as you wish. For some children, checking frequently is effective; for others, checking infrequently works best. Continue returning to check on your child as long as he is 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 okay.
- **What to do if your child gets out of bed or comes out of his room.** If your child gets out of bed or comes out of his room, firmly and calmly return him to bed. For some children, simply returning them to bed multiple times works. For others, letting him know that if he gets up again you will close the bedroom door can be effective. If your child gets out of bed, put him 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 him and leave the door open. If he is up, put him 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 his 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 him.
- **Reward your child.** Soon after your child awakens in the morning, reward him for what he 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.

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