

Making sleep time happen

Some parents are lucky. They have children who are natural born sleepers. Unfortunately, not all parents are this fortunate. Instead, some children seem to have a hypothetical allergy towards sleep, meaning that their sleep patterns leave parents on tenterhooks each time bed time approaches. When patterns for poor sleeping habits develop, it can be very tricky for children and parents to learn how to settle into a more pleasurable bedtime routine. For this reason, this article hopes to address some points that help parents identify how things may be done differently to help them create more amiable sleep time habits.

A caveat

While the types of strategies mentioned in this article may work for children with typical development, children with additional needs may require different sleep strategies, for example, children with sensory processing delays may need noise-proof rooms or lights that are not too bright etc. In these instances it is best to work with an occupational therapist or other similarly skilled professional to determine where children's sensitivities lie in order to develop a specifically tailored sensory diet.

Knowing what the recommended sleeping times are for different children

Before starting it is important to understand the recommended sleep times for children of different ages. When these recommendations are understood adults are able to determine if children are getting their child into bed too early or too late.

Recommended times for sleep:

1-12 months – 14-15 hrs a day

1-3 years – 12 -14 hrs a day

3-6 years - 10 – 12 hrs a day

7-12 years – 10 – 11 hrs a day

12-18 years – 8 – 9 hrs a day

Looking for causes of unwanted sleep habits

There may be a range of reasons why children develop poor or unwanted sleep patterns. Reasons may vary from night terrors to a recent move or life upheaval. In other instances children may have developed poor sleeping habits because they have learnt that they can stretch bedtime boundaries.

Who is change ready?

In order to make any changes to children's behaviours, those caring for children need to assess their willingness to commit to strategies that will help them yield the results they desire. While it might seem like a good idea to want to fix children's behaviour, it is not always a quick, straight-forward process. Instead it is much like dieting. Sometimes you may see no initial signs of change. When things remain as they were, it can be difficult not to lose hope and resign to the fact that change will not happen. On the other hand, results may occur for the first week or two before things stall. When things fail to move quickly or stall, everyone's resolve is put to the test.

Persevering, even when it looks like nothing is altering, can be extremely hard, but it is the one thing that is needed to enact long-lasting change. When talking about changing children's sleep patterns, parents need to first commit to the idea that to succeed they are going to have to prepare themselves for a few difficult weeks. Without the necessary commitment things are unlikely to change.

In instances where parents are not convinced they have got the necessary energy reserves needed to persevere, it may be an indication that now may not be the ideal time to try to enforce change. This comment is not suggesting that parents should not try to change things, however highlights the point that if parents try to enact change without the required levels of perseverance, it may reinforce the idea that parents will always be the ones to give up first.

Identifying genuine reasons from delaying tactics

One of the biggest misdemeanours children can be found guilty of is delay tactics. These include strategies such as needing to go to the toilet, being thirsty, needing an extra cuddle, being scared etc. Some of children's complaints can be legitimate. For this reason it can often be hard to tell genuine concerns from invented ones.

When children reach a certain point in their development (give or take around the age of three) they begin to understand that parents do not automatically know the difference between the truth and a lie. As such, children begin to flex their lying muscles, not because they are innately bad but rather because it lets them test the boundaries of relationships and allows them to see what happens. Naturally, lying about needing to get out of bed provides the perfect motivation for children as their ultimate goal is typically to delay going to bed.

Generally the younger the child the easier it is to spot a lie, thus helping parents to determine whether the drink request is necessary. As children get older, however, it becomes increasingly difficult. Regardless of the ease to spot a lie, parents can help themselves by eliminating the reasons why children may ask to get out of bed. An example of this may be to make sure that the child has had a drink prior to going to bed and that a firm and unwavering rule exists that there is no more drinking after getting into bed. Alternatively, parents may choose to place a drink on the child's bedside table. Once the reasons for delaying have been eliminated parents can begin to focus on making children stay in bed.

Identifying the strengths and needs of the current routine

While some children are born more flexible and can cope with less structure, most children do much better when they have a set routine that they can predict. Routines should be adapted to accommodate children's needs and best prepare them for the next activity. As any child care educator will tell you, their routine is developed in a way that encourages children's moods and energy levels to reflect the next activity in the day. Examples of this in action may include noisier activities such as music times happening prior to going outside, whereas reading a book may precede rest time.

Bedtime is naturally a time where children need to be calm and settled. Knowing what settles children can play to a parent's advantage because they can ensure children are doing what settles them prior to the lead up to bedtime. Equally, knowing what unsettles children can help parents establish what things should not happen just before bed. For example, many parents often comment that getting children to hop off technology, brush their teeth or have a bath increases rather than decreases a child's resistance levels. When activities that increase resistance are identified, parents can use this knowledge to play to their advantage, for example, they can motivate the children to brush their teeth before they get to have a play between dinner and bedtime. There is no definite right or wrong as all children are different, however there will be certain things that increase a child's resistance levels prior to going to sleep, meaning these things should be kept as far away as possible from bedtime.

Technological warning

While not all children seem to be affected negatively by technology, many are. Outbursts occur but are not limited to having to turn devices off. In addition, blue light created by devices can trick the brain into thinking that it is not yet time to go to sleep. If parents are aware that technology has an adverse effect on children then it may be time to consider putting devices away once dinner time approaches.

A bedtime routine starts in the morning

Although the focus is typically drawn towards the evening, it is important to acknowledge that bedtime includes waking up the following morning. When children have difficulty going to bed they are often left tired and cranky the following morning. As such, it can be tempting to let them sleep in. The problem with making this allowance is that it creates the opportunity for children to develop poor sleeping habits. In principle it is the same as letting children graze all day and then question why they will not eat their dinner. When children are left to sleep it off in the morning they will be less tempted to fall asleep at night. As such, waking children up early enough in the morning can help to encourage tiredness in the evenings.

Bringing the routine forward

Common grievances experienced by parents include not getting children to sleep until the late hours of the evening. When parents are aware that children do not want to go to sleep on time, there may be a call to try to alter the routine to accommodate expected battles. For example, if children typically take two hours to go to sleep, it may be beneficial to bring the sleep routine forward (even if by a little). Bringing a sleep routine forward will not necessarily mean the child will be asleep at the preferred time, but it may help to win the war on getting children to sleep before 11pm. Ideally this suggestion is designed to accommodate the idea that parents might succeed in ceasing the 'sleep time battles' an hour earlier than normal. Additionally, when parents start bedtime earlier they may discover they have the required perseverance/energy levels to keep going until the child gets the message that the parent is unwavering in their resolve about their bedtime expectations.

Avoid shifting sleep times on weekends or holidays

Everyone loves making their children's day by giving them little treats and extra allowances. Quite often parents may be tempted to allow bedtimes to be stretched out on weekends or during school holidays. While this may not cause a problem for some parents or children, there is a word of warning for parents who experience frequent bedtime delays. When working with children who struggle to maintain good sleep patterns, it may be an idea to consider not allowing bedtimes to shift.

Keeping tempers tempered

When children are focused on delaying going to bed, it does not occur to them that they do it to their own detriment. In other words, they care less about getting into trouble or receiving negative attention. Instead, being in trouble is far better than going to bed in some instances. Sometimes, although it is not always the case, some children develop a habit whereby their bedtime circuit breaker becomes a fight between them and a parent before they can settle down for the night.

Avoiding a negative communication pattern is vitally important. This suggestion does not mean that parents should shy away from sticking to their guns and doing everything possible to avoid a child's tears and tantrums. Instead it should be about keeping an even temper during difficult times and doing little to ignite a child's will. In most instances children feed off parents' negative energy. While they do not necessarily like it, they get to learn what to do to create the perfect conditions to ensure the parent falls into the delaying tactics trap.

Delaying bedtime works much better when parents buy into arguments and get angry. Some children even find humour in parental anger and work hard to ensure it happens again and again. Regardless of a child's temperament or strategies to get out of going to bed, no child finds it particularly appealing when a parent ushers them back into their bedroom without saying a word. When parents do not engage in any type of conversation, even if it's about how someone at school said something mean to them that day, they send the clear message that now is not the time to talk. Tomorrow is always another day and igniting the brain to think about problems and their solutions in the evening does little but ensure that the brain cannot switch off and settle. If need be, remind the child, using no more than a few words, that any concerns they have can be discussed the following day.

Not wanting to miss out

It is hard for younger siblings to grasp why they have to go to bed first. The result of their incomprehension means that they are often left with the idea that they are missing out on something if they go to bed earlier than others. Creating a routine that sends everyone off to their room at the same time can help. Once all children are in their rooms you can allow older children to play quietly in their rooms and stagger the expectations when it is time to turn the lights out. Because all children will be in their rooms at the same time, parents then have the opportunity to focus their efforts on the youngest children and get them to sleep without seeing the older children are still awake. Naturally there are limitations with this idea when siblings share rooms.

Limiting threats

It can be extremely hard for tempers not to be lost when children's bedtimes drag into the late hours of the evening. When tempers start to fray it is common for adults to start to make threats. The problem with threats is there is no worse punishment than going to bed. Dishing out punishments as a result of poor bedtime behaviour will infrequently make children behave differently. Instead, the mere threat of losing a toy or privilege will do little more than arouse the emotional part of the brain. When the emotional part of the brain is stimulated it is like adding coal into a steam engine's firebox. The problem with adding coal to a firebox is that it generates more heat and thus gives the engine more power to go faster for longer. As such, bedtimes, even amid a battle, require parental actions that prevent children from being fired up. Therefore, the focus is to remain on getting them to go to bed and staying there.

Controlled crying

This is a strategy that many people struggle to implement because it can be heart breaking hearing a child cry themselves to sleep. Traditionally the idea behind controlled crying is to put a child in their room and not go back into the room. Not having a parent return can be distressing for the child and cause their emotions to escalate, meaning that they have to wear themselves out before they finally fall asleep. Research suggests that this strategy has no long-term negative effects on children. Nevertheless it is certainly not a strategy for the faint hearted or those likely to give in. Once parents give in the child learns that crying and screaming will eventually get their parent to return.

An alternative way of implementing controlled crying is to allow the child to call for attention for a minute and then for the adult to go back into the room. When the adult enters, they kiss the child on the forehead, pull the covers up and, without making eye contact, leave the room again. This is then repeated after a two minute interval and so on, increasing the intervals by a minute each time.

Keep the faith

As with any behaviour management strategy, parents need to keep the faith that the techniques they are trialling will work. Just like losing weight, getting long-lasting change takes time. As such, parents will need to hold fast to the strategies that they decide to trial and persist, even when it seems like they are making little to no headway.

It all comes back to emotional regulation

No matter what we are talking about, when it comes to children's behaviour it always links back to one thing – the ability to emotionally regulate. Children who cannot regulate their emotions in other areas of their life are likely to experience difficulties settling for bed. As such, parents need to focus their efforts on helping children regulate their emotions throughout the day and not just at bedtime.

When children become frustrated it creates the perfect conditions for parents to help build children's resilience levels. Allowing children to be challenged by something and offering them encouragement to keep persisting can be the best gift a parent could ever give their child.

Bedtime requires listening skills and the ability to follow instructions

When broken down into simple parts, going to bed is just like any other request. Bringing your dishes to the sink, doing your chores, packing your toys away or waiting for others to stop talking before talking yourself are all examples of expectations parents may have. When children know how to listen and follow instructions they are more likely to follow bedtime instructions. If they cannot follow instructions in their everyday lives then it may not be surprising to discover they do not listen at bedtime. As such, working on children's listening skills in all facets of their lives will be a vital ingredient in being able to achieve success at bedtimes.

The final summary

Some children are naturally better sleepers than others. Children with additional needs may need parents to first identify what their sensitivities/needs are and develop programs and strategies that accommodate any additional needs. In order to experience success, parents need to be committed to change. Children will often use delaying tactics to get out of going to bed. Knowing children's strategies can help parents develop a resolve that helps them prevent

the child from using the same excuses over and over again. Like all things child-related, bedtime routines will have strengths and needs. Knowing where the weaknesses lie, for example, what types of activities escalate a child's resistance towards going to bed, can help parents rejig the bedtime routine and avoid activities that heighten a child's emotions before bedtime. Technology may cause a few issues prior to bedtime. This means that for some children technology may have to be removed long before bedtime ticks around.

While bedtime is typically thought of as being a night time woe, parents should remember that sleeping habits include the time we wake up as well. If children are allowed to sleep excess tiredness off then it may encourage ongoing sleep problems in the evening. When dealing with children's bed time misbehaviour it is important to keep tempers tempered. When parents' moods escalate so will a child's, thus creating dysfunctional communication patterns that may continue to exacerbate the problem.

There are many reasons children do not want to go to bed, including not wanting to miss out. If older siblings are the cause for a younger child not wanting to go to bed then it may be worthwhile restructuring the way everyone transitions going to bed, for example, everyone going to their rooms at the same time and then staggering lights out time.

Controlled crying is a typical method used to get children to go to sleep. Although no long-term negative effects have been identified it can be extremely difficult to implement. As such, a softer approach could be used to help parents feel more comfortable. Because it can take time to notice change it can be hard not to lose the faith that strategies are working. Just like medication, nothing makes things better overnight. Just as an antibiotic takes a week to take full effect so too will sleep time strategies. Unfortunately while antibiotics have a more lasting impression, sleep strategies need to be reinforced and sustained over a much longer period of time. As with anything involving children's behaviour, everything comes back to a child's ability to emotionally regulate. Without the ability to emotionally regulate children will not be able to deal with frustrations. In these instances children's emotions will peak and behaviour will become destructive. As such, it is important to support children to learn how to cope with frustrations and disappointment. Similarly, if children are not capable of listening and following instructions in other parts of their lives they are unlikely to be able to listen to parents' bedtime requests. To counteract this problem parents may find benefits by ensuring that children learn how to listen and follow instructions in all areas of their lives.

M.J. Fisher
Child and Family Therapist
B. Soc. Sc.; GradDip Teaching; Dip. Care and Ed.
www.whatmjdoes.com
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