

Bedtime Problems

What is the concern?

Sometimes young children have problems sleeping. They may delay or refuse to go to bed. They may cry after being put to bed, get out of bed, or refuse to sleep in their own bed. They may also wake up in the middle of the night and go to their parents' bed.

Why do problems at bedtime happen?

Parents usually feed and rock their young babies to sleep. However, as babies get older they may rely on being held and rocked to go to sleep at bedtime or when they wake up in the middle of the night. It is important for children to learn to fall asleep independently, without rocking, feeding, or parents' attention.

Sometimes parents encourage poor sleep habits by accident. For example, if you put your child to bed and he cries when you try to leave, you might go back to your child's room and lay down with him or take him to your bed. The child then learns that crying gets him attention and comfort from his parents and he will not learn to sleep on his own.

Problems at bedtime also occur if there is a change in the normal routine, for example, if your child becomes sick and you let him sleep in your bed for a few nights. These problems usually correct themselves when the normal routine returns. Sometimes children change their preferences and interests and something that may have brought comfort, like a stuffed animal or blanket, becomes undesirable to the child.

How can I prevent my child from having problems at bedtime?

Make sure your child's room is a comfortable temperature, is well-ventilated, and has a night-light. It is fine for your child to have something to help soothe himself such as one favorite stuffed animal or blanket to cuddle with at bedtime. Playing lullabies or classical music can be soothing and helpful too. Have a regular bedtime that is reasonable for your child's age.

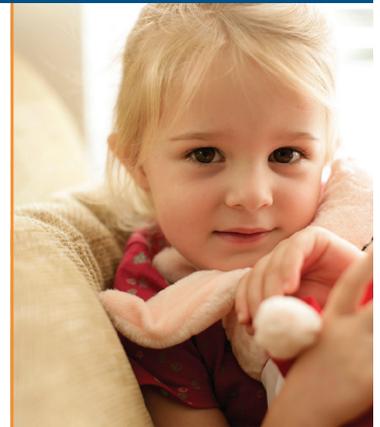
Set up a routine for your child, for example:

- Have her go to the bathroom, wash her face and hands, and brush her teeth.
- Read a book with your child.
- Make sure he has had a drink, has a night-light or anything else needed. A child should not be given a drink in a bottle or cup to have while in bed.
- Encourage your child to be quiet and stay in bed. Tell him to relax, rest, and get some sleep.
- Say good night.

Prepare this routine ahead of time. Let your child know about 30 minutes ahead of time he will be going to bed soon. Have quiet activities during this last half hour—no active play, television, or video games.

When your child goes to bed, make sure every step is done. Say:

- Did you brush your teeth?
- Did you say good night to everyone?
- Did you have a drink?
- Did you use the toilet?
- Now you are ready for sleep.



Tips to Remember:

- Keep a consistent bedtime routine.
- Praise and reward your child for staying in bed.
- Have quiet activity before bedtime, no TV or active play; it delays start of sleep.
- Use a sleep diary to chart successes and difficulties.
- Be patient--you may have to try over and over again before these routines take effect.
- If these suggestions do not work, please talk with your pediatrician for more ideas.

By Meghan McAuliffe Lines, PhD
Doug Tynan, PhD
Erin Carroll, MS

Say good night, such as with a hug and kiss, and leave. In the morning, praise your child for staying in bed.

How do I teach my child to stay in bed?

Explain what will happen: “You will go to bed, and if you stay there and are quiet, I will come back to check on you in a couple of minutes.” Ignore any complaints and leave.

After 2 minutes, if your child is quiet, return and praise her: “You are doing a good job staying in bed and you are quiet. I will come back again.” Then go back in 3-4 minutes. Repeat again after 5 minutes. Continue checking every 5 minutes until the child is asleep. By doing this, the child is learning how to go to sleep on her own without you in the room.

What if my child will not stay quiet or will not stay in bed?

Use a slow but sure approach, which is probably easier with younger toddlers.

Tell your child that you will check on him a couple of times. Explain what will happen: “If you stay in your bed all night, you will earn a reward in the morning.” Tell him what the reward will be.

If your child cries, do not respond right away. Wait at least three minutes, go in and remind your child it is time to go to sleep. Your goal here is to comfort the child, not to stay until he falls asleep.

After one minute leave the room, even if he is still crying. Go back in 3 minutes, then wait 5, 7, and up to 11 minutes between going to your child and being away from the room. Keep to the time schedule and use a digital clock. Only stay **one minute** each time you go in to the child’s room.

Use a sleep diary or chart to keep track of difficulties and successes. This diary will help you determine things that make the routine harder or easier.

If your child gets out of bed:

Return your child immediately to bed. Stay calm. If she comes out again, return your child to bed and close the bedroom door. Open the door when she has been quiet for two minutes. Repeat this every time your child comes out of her room. Return your child, close the door, and open it when she has been quiet for two minutes. Calmly closing the door works much better than threatening or spanking.

If your child comes to your bed:

Return your child to his bed, stay in the room no more than a minute. If it happens again, return your child again and then close your bedroom door. Be patient—you may have to try this over and over before it works. Most problems can be avoided by having clear routines and very predictable responses when children leave their room.