

Kids and poor sleep: A habit that's breakable

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Children enter the world hardwired with plenty of quirks and traits, but no one is born a "bad sleeper." In fact, sleep troubles are a habit kids pick up—and one that parents often unknowingly reinforce.

Though it's not easy to change poor sleep habits, it's not

impossible—particularly for [children](#) in preschool and elementary school, says Lynelle Schneeberg, PsyD, a Yale Medicine psychologist and author of "Become Your Child's Sleep Coach: The Bedtime Doctor's 5-Step Guide, Ages 3-10" (Lifelong Books).

It's with the best of intentions that parents end up reinforcing poor sleep habits, notes Schneeberg, identifying "too much parental assistance" as a key factor fueling the problem. "It is challenging to help children in this age group learn to fall asleep independently at bedtime because they can talk and walk, which means they can ask you to come back to their room for many creative reasons, or come out of their rooms to find you and ask for one more escorted trip to the bathroom, more ice for their water cup, and so on," Schneeberg explains. "Luckily, their brains are adaptable, and they can learn new ways to fall asleep that don't involve a parent."

Understanding how you respond to your child's nighttime requests is the first step to addressing them, says Craig Canapari, MD, a Yale Medicine pediatric sleep specialist, pulmonologist, and author of "It's Never Too Late to Sleep Train: The Low-Stress Way to High-Quality Sleep for Babies, Kids, and Parents" (Rodale).

For example, if your child cries out for you in the middle of the night and you habitually rock him back to sleep, you are imprinting that habit in your brain, Dr. Canapari explains—adding that your own fatigue and stress actually increase the likelihood you'll develop a counterproductive habit. "That's why tired parents often fall into the same patterns over and over—your tired brain forms habits to reduce your need to think," he writes. Plus, your child falls into the habit of falling asleep in your arms or with you in the room, which can be tough to break.

So what's the solution? Create new, healthy habits around everything involving your child's sleep routine. "Routine" is the key word here.

Children naturally crave consistency and predictability—not just for sleep, but for most aspects of their day-to-day lives. Clear rules and expectations help reduce anxiety because your child knows what to expect, and therefore can help things run smoothly. A firm order of events around bedtime will allow you and your child to adopt good habits—meaning you can turn on "autopilot" and follow a set plan.

In their books, Schneeberg and Dr. Canapari both delve into the nitty-gritty of how to create a solid bedtime routine, offering ways to tackle [common problems](#), including night terrors, early wakings, and children who won't sleep in their own beds.

But before you can bring about positive change, it helps to understand where things went wrong. We highlight a few mistakes caregivers make and offer tips from Dr. Canapari and Schneeberg on how to fix them.

Mistake No. 1: Staying or sleeping in your child's bedroom

"Lay down with me." "Stay here." It can be hard to resist a pleading child at bedtime, especially if you are desperate to get your child down so you can do household chores, relax, or sleep yourself. But if you give in to your child's wishes and stay with him until he drifts to sleep, you are inadvertently training him to rely on your presence in order to fall asleep.

You may also be snuggling, rubbing his back, or singing a lullaby. Such "sleep crutches" or "sleep props" become habits for you and your child, Schneeberg says. Plus, your child can become so accustomed to your being there at bedtime that if he wakes up in the middle of the night, he'll need you to return to sleep.

Solution: Teach your child how to "self soothe" and fall asleep independently, Schneeberg says. Place a basket next to your child's bed and fill it with calm, quiet activities he can do on his own. For example, include chapter or picture books—depending on age and reading ability—a few stuffed animals or action figures, some paper, and crayons. Add a flashlight or headlamp to the basket so he doesn't need to turn on a bright light.

The idea is for your child to have items that are fun—but not too stimulating—and that can be played with in bed until he is drowsy enough to fall asleep. This, Schneeberg says, is a good habit to form and one adults often use themselves. If your child protests, be gentle (but firm) and tell him you are confident he can fall asleep on his own and that you will not be far away.

Mistake No. 2: Lack of limits

Whether it's suddenly claiming they're starving or that the bed covers are hot, itchy, or just aren't "right" in some other way, kids are masters at coming up with reasons they can't sleep. Schneeberg calls these "curtain calls" (if the child comes out of the bedroom to report these complaints) or "callbacks" (if the child calls the parent back to her room).

Solution: Dr. Canapari and Schneeberg suggest simple reward systems as a way to handle curtain calls and callbacks. For example, Dr. Canapari says you could give your child a "bedtime pass" each night, which allows her to come out of her room and make one request (a glass of water, quick story). If she doesn't use the pass, she gets a small reward the next morning.

Dr. Canapari suggests decorating the card with glitter or laminating it to make it fun. Also, if your child typically makes four curtain calls a night, you may want to start by handing out three passes a night and gradually

reduce the number. The key is to set your child up for success, he says.

Explain the reward system to your child in advance. In fact, you may want to consider rehearsing the entire bedtime routine, rewards and all, during a calm part of the day, Dr. Canapari advises.

Mistake No. 3: A poorly setup bedroom

Good bedrooms, according to Dr. Canapari, are quiet, dark, and unplugged. It's OK to use a fan or white noise machine, if needed, or a night-light to provide some illumination.

Certain details about the room should be the same at 8 p.m., or whenever your child falls asleep, as they are at 2 a.m., when your child may naturally wake up, Schneeberg says. "Is the hallway light on when your child goes to sleep? If so, it should be on in the middle of the night, too," she says.

Solution: Keep the environment and key details of your child's bedroom consistent at bedtime.

As for electronic devices, both Dr. Canapari and Schneeberg advise that children should stay away from TVs, computers, video games, and smart phones 30 to 60 minutes before bed. And, none of these devices should be allowed in their rooms while they sleep.

"It is unlikely that your child has the willpower to resist these devices if they light up the room with an alert during the night," Dr. Canapari writes. "These alerts can fragment sleep even if your child does not interact with the device." (This is good advice for adults, too.)

Mistake No. 4: No routine

Getting a child ready for bed sounds easy enough. Brush teeth. Put on jammies. Hear a story. Climb under the covers. But all parents know the process seldom runs smoothly—or without resistance.

Often, this circles back to the lack of consistency. For example, if one parent tucks a child in one night at 9 p.m. and lies down with her for 30 minutes, and the next night, the other parent moves bedtime to 8 and tries to leave the room immediately, it's understandable that the child is confused about what to expect each night.

Solution: Both sleep experts advocate for a clear, consistent bedtime routine. That means your child goes to bed at or at least near the same time each night, experiencing a predictable sequence of events. "That could include having a snack and a drink, getting a bath, putting on pajamas, brushing teeth, taking a final bathroom trip, and wrapping up with two bedtime stories," Schneeberg says. "When the routine is established, you make it clear to the [child](#) that there is no more food or drink later on or extra stories after two have been read."

Don't give in

Like most parenting challenges, the situation often gets worse before it gets better. If you decide to break some bad sleeping habits in your home, don't expect that change will happen overnight. There may be tears and tantrums, obstinacy, and resistance. The good news is, this low point—with all the setbacks and drama—is often the turning point, a sign that better sleep is on the horizon, Dr. Canapari says.

So, stick to your plan for a consistent sleep routine and don't get sidetracked. Prepare yourself for the likelihood that the positive changes you are making may take a few weeks, or even a month. Remind yourself that a good night's sleep is around the corner for your entire household, and all the drama may soon seem like a bad dream.

Provided by Yale University

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