

Parent Resources

Ideas for Making Bedtime a Better Time

When asked which time of day creates the most difficulties for families, parents inevitably say "bedtime!" This is the time when all family members are tired. They might be wound up from the day's events and thinking about their plans for tomorrow. Also, not everyone wants to wind down at night, and some people struggle with their internal clock.

Sleep needs

Adequate sleep is important to children's learning and overall functioning. A study funded by the National Institutes of Health found that sleep-deprived children had levels of inattentiveness that were observable by their teachers and that had an impact on the children's learning abilities. Lack of sleep was also found to be related to memory problems and behavioral concerns.

While each child's sleep needs vary, the National Sleep Foundation recommends the following hours of sleep per day for these age groups:

- Ages 3-6: between 11-13 hours
- Ages 7-10: between 10-11 hours
- Ages 11-17: between 8.5-9.25 hours
- Adults: between 7-9 hours

Quiet time for parents

Carving out an extra hour or two in the evening can go a long way toward helping parents replenish their reserves. This principle is similar to flying on an airplane. In the event of an emergency, oxygen masks drop from the plane's ceiling. The initial instinct for an adult might be to help

secure a child's mask first, but parents are asked to put on their own masks before attending to their children. If we do not first care for ourselves, we might not be able to care for our children at all.

Establishing a bedtime routine

A bedtime routine is important, not just for children's learning and health but also for their comfort and security. All children, especially those who have developmental disabilities, thrive on structure and consistency. There might be much of their world that they cannot see, hear, control or understand; but they can find comfort and a sense of security in knowing what is going to happen at a certain time.

Setting up a routine might seem like a large task. However, being consistent in following through will reap rewards when the routine is established. Children might (and probably will) resist new rules at first, but they will follow along when they see that the rules are going to continue.

To begin, think about what brings your child comfort. Is it a stuffed animal? Is it hugs, kisses and cuddling? Is it reading time? This comfort object or activity can be used to help with the transition from evening activities to bedtime and to make the time enjoyable for your child.

Before finalizing a routine, set a realistic goal. If your child is regularly going to bed at 10 p.m. and you would like him in bed and asleep at 8 p.m., implement small changes to work toward the 8 p.m. final goal. Start by setting up your routine and expecting him in bed at 9:45 p.m. After

he adjusts to the routine and is successful, move the routine back 15 minutes and set bedtime at 9:30 p.m. Repeat this until your child is ready to go to bed at 8 p.m.

When establishing a bedtime routine, the first step is to work out the time schedule. When should you begin the routine to have your child in bed and going to sleep at the initial goal time? For some families, this might be 45-60 minutes. Decide on a way to let your child know that bedtime is near. Announce it every night, give your child a picture showing his or her bed or a picture of someone sleeping, or point out the time on the clock. Then, set a standard schedule. Tell your child, "First we put away our toys. Then we shower and brush our teeth. Then we lay out clothes for tomorrow. Then we lie in bed quietly with our snuggly animal and read. Then the lights go out at 8:00." (Social stories and picture schedules can be helpful with this.)

Support the routine by setting the stage for a quiet bedtime. Turn off or lower the volume of TV sets, and keep lights around your child's room off or dimmed. Other children should also have expected bedtimes with their own schedules.

Your child might challenge the new routine or test his or her limits. Sticking to the routine and schedule will keep such testing to a minimum. Some parents use reinforcements (praise, preferred objects and/or activities) for adherence to rules. It helps if you make bedtime a positive time in which you focus on your child and share enjoyable activities.



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