



Five bedtime mistakes good parents make, and how to fix them

By Malia Jacobson

Does the word "bedtime" conjure up images of sleepy pajama-clad children, snuggling under the covers and peacefully drifting off to dreamland? Or does your mind immediately turn to the whining, tantrums, endless requests and power struggles that make up your child's nightly routine?

Parents have the best of intentions when they create a bedtime routine, says Stephen Grant, M.D., of Iowa Sleep Center. But all too often, their hard work goes unrewarded. Many common bedtime mistakes create obstacles to sleep that sabotage a bedtime routine's success. In need of bedtime course-correction? Take note of these common bedtime mistakes and the simple solutions that will put your family on the path to bedtime bliss.

Bedtime mistake one: power play

Bedtime should be a soothing send-off into sleep—not a stand-off. But many parents create bedtime problems by turning bedtime into a power struggle, says Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., medical director of the National Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers. In an effort to enforce bedtime rules, parents often spark resistance in their children and create unneeded bedtime drama.

For a better bedtime:

Most healthy children will want to be able to make choices for themselves, says Teitelbaum. Although setting boundaries and rules is important, allowing children to have responsibility for their own actions can make the difference between a peaceful bedtime and a family face-off. Teitelbaum recommends offering children a desirable reward—like a sticker or token that can be redeemed for a trip to the zoo or a movie outing—for each night that bedtime goes smoothly. After two to three weeks, the bedtime routine will be in place, he says.

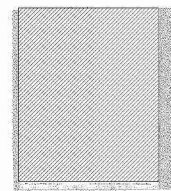
Bedtime mistake two: sugar shack

Bedtime snacks are a must in many homes. But sugar-laden foods or anything containing caffeine will do kids a disservice at bedtime. A 16-ounce soda has 12 teaspoons of sugar, making kids jumpy and wired when they should be winding down for sleep. Even favorites like hot cocoa, tea and chocolate milk can contain enough caffeine to bother sensitive kids.

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For a better bedtime:

To prepare kids' brains and bodies for sleep, avoid chocolate, soda and tea. Instead, pair foods containing sleep-inducing tryptophan—found in nuts, soybeans, meat and dairy—with complex carbohydrates. The carbohydrates will trigger the release of insulin, which helps tryptophan enter the brain to weave its sleepy spell. So whole-grain cereal with milk or soymilk, nut butter on whole-grain crackers or a half a turkey-and-cheese sandwich on whole-wheat bread are excellent choices. And be sure to serve the bedtime snack an hour before kids hit the sack, because snoozing on full a stomach can disrupt sleep.



Bedtime mistake three: night owl

Plain and simple, many parents put their kids to bed too late—and trying to get overtired kids to sleep is no easy task. “I am stunned by the number of parents I meet that believe young kids age 5-10 can get by on 8 hours of sleep, says Grant. “I recommend at least 9, preferably 10 hours per night.”

For a better bedtime:

For many kids, an earlier bedtime is an easier bedtime: when kids become overtired, their bodies pump out adrenaline that makes settling down difficult. Make an earlier bedtime a priority by saying no to late-evening extracurriculars. Devote after-school hours to homework, so kids aren't up late working on assignments. The entire family can tackle chores together right after dinner, freeing up the evening hours for relaxation and bedtime prep.

Bedtime mistake four: highly irregular

Many families have bedtime routines that are anything but routine. They may read their child two stories one night and six stories another night. They may spend 20 minutes on bedtime one night and 40 minutes the next. But this inconsistency defeats the entire purpose of a bedtime routine: to cue a child's subconscious for sleep with a predictable sequence of events, night after night.

For a better bedtime:

For a bedtime routine to work, the emphasis must be on the routine. Though different parents or caregivers can perform the bedtime routine, the routine itself should be ironclad. Always spend roughly the same amount of time on bedtime each night, and perform the same things in the same order—each and every night.

Bedtime mistake five: environmental cues

Blaring television, glaring overhead lights, family members chatting in the next room—this hardly sounds like a restful scene. Yet parents often expect their children to doze off in conditions that aren't ideal for sleep, says Grant. Bright, loud conditions make it difficult for children's brains and bodies to relax and prepare for sleep and practically guarantee bedtime difficulties.

For a better bedtime:

Darkness cues the production of melatonin, so dimming the house lights after dinner will help kids feel sleepier at bedtime. Don't include television in a bedtime routine; the lights, sounds, and frenzied activity on-screen can over-stimulate young brains and make drifting off to sleep difficult.

A successful bedtime takes planning, preparation and cooperation from everyone in the household. But the payoff—children who are healthier, more cheerful, and perform better in school—is undoubtedly worth the work. And there's an even sweeter reward for parents who say goodnight to bad bedtime habits: a breezy bedtime that gets easier as time goes on. “Children like ritual and routine,” says Grant. “The more consistent the routine, the easier it becomes.”



Malia Jacobson is a nationally published sleep expert and health journalist. Her most recent book is “Sleep Tight, Every Night: Helping Toddlers and Preschoolers Sleep Well Without Tears, Tricks, or Tirades.”

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