

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Winning the War on Bedtime Battles

With dishes to wash, bills to pay and dogs to walk, most parents long to make good use of those precious evening hours or enjoy some much needed relaxation after the kids have gone to bed. Unfortunately, for many families, things rarely go as planned. Parents often fight a nightly battle with their children, constantly coaxing them to sleep or back to sleep, hours after their true bedtime.

Kids see sleep as an interruption to their busy and exciting day and parents often find themselves tired and guilty when it's time for the kids to hit the hay. However, bedtime doesn't have to be a miserable experience. With a consistent approach and a few crafty strategies, you'll learn to make the time leading up to lights out a mellow, memorable time that you actually look forward to. The result? Less stress for you, more sleep for your child and perhaps even a reduction in your caffeine consumption.

Routine, routine, routine! Creating a bedtime ritual is the single most important tactic you can use to reclaim your evening. You may need to experiment, but what's important is to develop a plan and stick to it (parents often create further problems by jumping between methods and schedules). Look at bedtime as a wonderful opportunity for quality time with your kids and select activities that both you and your children will enjoy. The routine should be about 20 to 30 minutes long and follow the same sequence of events every night. Your pre-slumber routine might include: a bath, a book and then a song before lights out.

Slow it down. If your kids are re-enacting wrestling moves or playing high-energy video games right before bedtime, you can't expect them to instantly wind down. To ease into snooze mode, always keep things quiet the last hour before bedtime. Turn off the TV and computer, put away noisy toys and dim the lights. Encourage the whole family to enjoy quiet activities like reading and puzzles. Sleep will become more appealing if the whole family learns to slow down.

Keep your kids in the loop. Clearly spell out bedtime routines with your children and post the plan in their room. Praise them as each step is completed and give them a heads up about what will happen next. E.g., "After you brush your teeth, we'll read one of your favorite books." Kids adapt easily if they know what to expect. Before you know it, your children will be on cruise control moving from the bathroom, to bookshelf, to bed.

Make it universal. There are bound to be times when you won't be there to put the kids to bed so it's wise to make this routine as simple and straightforward enough for anyone to follow. That way, one night out on the town won't destroy your hard-earned progress.

Stand your ground. Always give children a 30-minute heads-up before their bedtime routine starts. Let them know that bedtime is non-negotiable—don't allow for an extra 20 minutes just because there are tears. Once the pre-sleep routine is complete, remind them that there is no reason for them to leave their room.

If they start wandering down the hall, calmly return them to bed without getting sucked in to reasoning, bargaining or arguing. Also, try to address all of the "excuses" or means of delaying bedtime e.g., "I need a drink", "I need to go to the bathroom", "I don't like the dark". In making pre-bedtime preparations e.g., installing a night light or keeping a small drink next to the bed, you're limiting the reasons for your child to leave their room.

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Kids will often go to great lengths to get your attention, be it positive or negative. By keeping your words to a minimum and keeping your cool, children will eventually get the hint. If you're used to high-drama pre-slumber then know you'll probably need to return kids to their room many times before they get the message. But by holding your ground and staying consistent, know that it will get progressively easier every night.

Change with the times. If your 10-year-old is resisting your seven o'clock lights out policy, it may be time to revisit the ground rules. Every child's need for sleep is different at different ages and stages. Signs bedtime is too early include: trouble falling asleep and waking up several times in the night. They may not be getting enough sleep if you have to physically wake them from a deep slumber every morning, or if they're unusually cranky around dinner time. If you notice a great change in kids' bed or waking time behavior—whether they seem sluggish or restless—it may be appropriate to adjust their sleep routine.

Find your own path. There are many ways to help children get to sleep and there are no right or wrong solutions. Do your research on different sleep philosophies, trust your instincts and map out a plan that works best for your family.

You may not win the bedtime battle every single night, but with patience, persistence and, most importantly consistency, you'll be able to change your kid's bedtime routine for the better and enjoy the benefits of more time to yourself, less stress and most importantly, well rested kids.