

Helping Parents Win Bedtime Battles

An expert guide to toddler sleep for health care professionals

Healthcare professionals play an important part in helping parents of toddlers (1-3 years) establish healthy and restful bedtime routines

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Key Learnings

1. Stress the importance of planning.

Parents must establish a bedtime routine that sets out where bedtime happens as well as how, and for how long.

2. Parents must remain consistent.

Toddlers are adept in finding ways to stretch bedtime out for hours. When parents establish new routine, they must stick to it.

3. Patience is essential.

Getting a toddler's co-operation at bedtime can take a while. But when parents get the timing right and stay consistent, success is possible.

The Frontline Issues

Dealing with a strong-willed toddler determined to practice the word 'no' at bedtime is a strain for any parent. Healthcare professionals regularly hear of the difficulties bedtime struggles create within a family.

Typical bedtime strategies employed by toddlers include:

- Calls for extra attention
- Toilet runs
- Looking for drinks
- Looking for another 'last' cuddle or story
- Requesting that one parent stays
- Requesting that the other parent comes back...

Parents report that their toddler's bedtime sleep routine can take up to three hours. This is a serious problem that your expertise can help resolve.

You know the effect – so what are the causes?

1. Overtiredness

The problem:

The largest contributory factor is an overtired child. This can be due to inadequate daytime sleep, a nap that happens too early in the day or is not long enough, and a resulting bedtime process that starts too late. Even 7.30-8pm may be too late a bedtime for a toddler who is sleep resistant, and may not routinely sleep well at night.

The solution: Encourage parents to aim for their toddler to be asleep again within four-to-five hours of their daytime sleep finishing. Within this time frame, allow for 20-30 minutes of the bedtime routine and a further 20-30 minutes of falling-asleep time. It may take a while for this routine to fall into place, but this is where they need to begin. If parents spot sleep signals earlier in the evening, they should follow them. This is particularly important for parents whose toddlers have recently given up their daytime sleep, or who routinely wake at night. A very early bedtime (6pm onwards) can provide a great temporary solution to the night-time battles.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

1

A toddler should be asleep again within four-to-five hours of the end of their daytime sleep.

2. Location, location, location

The problem:

Many families don't use a suitable sleep environment, or fail to adequately define the toddler's place of sleep.

The solution:

Recommend that the room is dark, cool and comfortable for sleep. Remove distractions that may over-stimulate the toddler, such as items hanging from the ceiling or too many toys. The entire bedtime routine should happen in the bedroom. A dim environment helps enhance the sleep hormone melatonin.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

2

Be warned! A toddler who is parent-dependent at bedtime can be more inclined to wake at night than one who is not.

3. Continuity

The problem:

Parents are inconsistent in their approaches, which confuses and frustrates the child (and makes the problem worse).

The solution:

Suggest parents follow the same sequence of events every night. This will ensure continuity from a behavioural context and reduce last minute objections. Suggest a specific bedtime area in the bedroom where the bedtime routine should happen. For example they could put down a rug, cushions, fairy lights, or have a tent or a canopy. The bedtime routine must happen outside of the bed. Only when it is time to sleep should the child then get into bed and pull up the covers. If the bedtime routine is provided on the bed, this can cause an objection to the parent leaving. This can upset the toddler and in turn create inconsistent behaviour on the parents' part. Keeping the routine separate from the going-to-sleep space promotes the ability to leave while the toddler is awake.

Four factors that can impact on night-time sleep

In addition to these issues, there are other factors relating to a toddler's day which can contribute to night-time sleeping problems. Discuss with parents whether any of these are at play in their situation.

- 1. Adequate nutrition?** Toddlers may not sleep well if they do not have three balanced meals a day, adequate milk and water and healthy snacks
- 2. Too much milk?** An over-reliance on milk directly before bedtime can often result in biologically unnecessary night-time feeds. This can reduce a toddler's appetite for solid food during that day, which only further increases the cycle of night-time activity...
- 3. Too much screen time.** Too much exposure to television and electronic media throughout the day (and specifically within the final couple of hours before bedtime) can make it hard for a toddler to switch off and get enough deep, restorative sleep.
- 4. Adequate activity?** A toddler who doesn't get enough outside activity and fresh air may not sleep well. Recommend an hour minimum per day.

Help parents win the battle

Use a light timer.

A timer signalling the end of the bedtime routine can be a positive way to tell a toddler that it is now sleep time.

Plan the process.

Suggest that parents get their toddler's involved in the planning of the bedtime process. They could make a booklet, photo album or check list that plots the routine one-by-one.

Sample Check List

My name is and at bedtime I...

- Have a drink downstairs
- Clean my teeth and have a bath
- Go to my bedroom
- Put on my sleep clothes
- Read two books
- Chat about my day & have a cuddle
- Turn out the lights & climb into bed
- Go to sleep!

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