



The Importance of Bedtime

For both children and busy parents, bedtime is a very important time of the day. Busy parents need the hours after a child is asleep to catch up on chores, pursue their own interests, relax or talk with their mates. Children not only need sufficient sleep, but also need to reflect on their daily experiences and to be reassured that tomorrow will be better or just as wonderful.

For young children, each day can feel like a lifetime. The end of that day can bring a profound sense of loss. At bedtime, they must leave those with whom they have shared their daily experiences. They have to collect all the emotions about the day's events to go to sleep. They want to be reassured that mommy or daddy will be there in the morning and that more wonderful experiences await them tomorrow.

There are many ways parents can help children with bedtime.

- ™ **Establish a regular hour for bedtime so children know what to expect.** Choose a time that meets everyone's needs. In general, young children need 10-14 hours of sleep each day. One way to determine a satisfactory bedtime is by working back from when the child usually wakes. For example, if your child usually wakes up at 7:00 a.m. each morning and takes a two-hour nap daily, count back 10 hours to 9:00 p.m. If he doesn't nap or needs more sleep, you can adjust the bedtime by an hour or two. Or, you can adjust bedtime to meet your own needs - to have more time to yourself or to spend more time with your child. Once you have chosen an acceptable hour for bedtime, use it as a general goal not a fixed requirement.
- ™ **Develop a bedtime routine that helps children prepare for sleep.** The structure of a bedtime routine also gives children a sense of order that is very reassuring. A routine is a predictable sequence of events. What is important is that events follow each other in a regular pattern, not what events make up your bedtime ritual. Every family is different and establishes daily routines to meet its own needs. In general, parents should establish bedtime routines that help kids calm down and become quiet. So, if bath time tends to be loud and splashy, schedule it early in your evening routine.
- ™ **Create bedtime rituals that have special significance for your child.** Getting clothes ready for the next day raises expectations and promises for awakening. Reading a bedtime story together lets parent and child share a special moment together and, depending on the book selected may help the child resolve certain feelings. Singing lullabies can enhance the quieting process and provide a soothing, comforting end to the day. Tucking in teddy or dolly brings peace of mind to children who do not want to be left alone.
- ™ **Be prepared to help children calm down.** Some children may require more time and attention before they can settle down and accept sleep with ease and comfort. Children are intensely individual and each day brings new experiences and feelings. Some days pass with relative tranquillity, but others are tumultuous, leaving the child filled with tension and pent-up emotions.

™ This backlog of feelings can prevent her from settling down. You can help by allowing her some leeway within the specified bedtime to unwind, calm down and collect her thoughts and feelings. Listening to your child review her day and recognizing that her experiences are important can be very helpful.

™ **Avoid bedtime conflict.** Parents become unnecessarily upset when children do not fall asleep right away. If children have been cooperative with the bedtime routine and are quiet, fatigue will take over and they will eventually fall asleep. If they have not settled down and still seem tense, you should spend a bit more time on the quieting process. Remember that you can set a time for bed and lights out, but it is impossible to set a regular time for kids to fall asleep. They will sleep when they are tired. Yelling and screaming only increases their stress and guarantees that it will take longer for them to calm down.

™ **Don't forget that adults need sufficient sleep as well.** Fatigue and exhaustion can play a critical role in parental stress and anger. Parents are more likely to be irritable and irrational when they suffer from sleep deprivation. Research shows that adults still need about seven-eight hours of sleep daily for optimal performance. So, even though you may want to do more housework or "surf" the Internet or watch the evening news, the best choice at times is to go straight to bed.

Bedtime is important for children and their parents. Not only do family members need to get enough sleep for overall health and well being, but it's also a daily routine that can bring a satisfying end to a busy day. Try to make it as pleasant and comforting as possible.

Source: Tim Jahn, Human Development Specialist, at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.