

## **Who Should Use This Guide?**

Getting a child to go to bed is a common problem that many parents experience. Some children use stalling and excuses to resist going to bed, whereas others go to bed initially but do not stay there. Bedtime problems can be one of the most frustrating parts of a parent’s day. Bedtime problems can occur at any age but are most prevalent between 3 and 6 years. If your child has had difficulties going to bed for awhile, prepare yourself for some hard work. Changing behavior is always difficult. Your child is probably happy with bedtime the way it is and so will initially have little motivation to change. You need to be consistent and persistent.

## **Tips for Parents**

- **Explain the new bedtime rules to your child.** Before you start the new nighttime program, sit down with your child during the day and let him know what you expect. Do not make your conversation too long or involved and do not over explain. Ignore any negative comments by your child and avoid arguing about the new rules.
- **Set bedtime.** Once you have decided on your child’s bedtime, be consistent about it. Establish a regular bedtime to help set your child’s internal clock. Be sure that your child is ready for sleep before putting him to bed. This may seem obvious, but sometimes parents set a bedtime for their own convenience. For example, some children’s biological clocks make them more likely to be “night owls”. These children may have difficulty with an earlier bedtime.
- **Bedtime fading.** Putting children to bed when they are not tired increases the likelihood of bedtime struggles. Therefore, for some children it is best to start by setting the bedtime at the time they usually fall asleep and gradually make the bedtime earlier. When you start, you will first need to determine when your child is naturally falling asleep and set this as their temporary bedtime. If you would like your child to go to bed at 8:30, but they usually do not fall asleep until 10:30, choose 10:30 as the temporary bedtime. This will make it easier to teach your child how to fall asleep within a short time of getting into bed. Once they are falling asleep easily and quickly at this temporary bedtime you can then start making his bedtime earlier 15 minutes every few days. Be patient. If you move the bedtime back too quickly, you may have problems with your child not being able to fall asleep on their own.
- **Bedtime routine.** Be sure to establish a consistent bedtime routine. A bedtime routine should include calm and enjoyable activities, such as a bath and bedtime stories. Avoid stimulating high-energy activities, such as playing outside, running around, or watching exciting television shows or videos. Make a chart of your bedtime routine to help keep your child on track.
- **Ignore complaints or protests.** Ignore and do not respond to your child’s complaints or protests about bedtime, such as not being tired. Discussing or arguing about bedtime will lead to a struggle with your child, thus maintaining bedtime problems. Firmly and calmly let your child know it is time for bed and continue with the routine.
- **Putting your child to bed.** When the bedtime routine is complete, put your child to bed and leave the room. It is important that you leave the room while your child is awake, as this helps your child learn to fall asleep on his own.

- **If your child cries or yells.** If your child is yelling or calling out to you but remaining in his bed, remind him one time that it is bedtime. If he continues to be upset, check on your child. Wait for as long or short of a time as you wish. For some children, checking frequently is effective; for others, checking infrequently works best. Continue returning to check on your child as long as he is crying or upset. The visits should be brief (1 minute) and boring. Don't soothe or comfort your child during these visits and don't get into a discussion. Calmly tell your child that it's time to go to sleep. The purpose of returning to the room is to reassure your child that you are still present and to reassure you that your child is okay.
- **What to do if your child gets out of bed or comes out of his room.** If your child gets out of bed or comes out of his room, firmly and calmly return them to bed. Creating a bedtime pass system may help children who leave their room many times during the night. For example, start by giving your child several "passes" and then reward your child the next morning if they are able to keep at least one bedroom pass through the night. A bedroom pass is given to their parent each time she needs to get a family member for comfort. The child is given fewer passes every few days to improve compliance to the routine.
- **Don't lock your child in his room.** Locking the door may be scary for your child. The goal is to teach your child to stay in bed, not punish or scare him.
- **Reward your child.** Soon after your child awakens in the morning, reward him for what he did well the night before. Don't dwell on misbehavior from the previous night. Give your attention to your child's successes. Stickers and praise are good ways to reward your child for even small improvements.
- **Be consistent and don't give up.** The first few nights are likely to be very challenging. You should start to see major improvements within the first few weeks.

Adapted from: Mindell JA & Owens JA (2003). A Clinical Guide to Pediatric Sleep: Diagnosis and Management of Sleep Problems. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

## Books & Web Sites

***What To Do When You Dread your Bed*** by Dawn Huebener, Ph.D.

***The Sleep Fairy*** by Janie and Macy Peterson

***Taking Charge of your Child's Sleep: All in one Resource for Solving Sleep Problems in Kids and Teens*** by Judith Owens, M.D. and Jodi A. Mindell, Ph.D.

## Local Resources

**Daily Behavioral Health**, 14538 Grapeland Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44111, 216-252-1399,  
[www.dailybh.com](http://www.dailybh.com) Offices in West Cleveland and Avon

**This Guide Provided By:**

