

THE ART OF SLEEP

A good night's sleep is ESSENTIAL for children's wellbeing, but achieving it can feel like an IMPOSSIBLE dream. Try these strategies for fussy sleepers

WORDS by ELAINE HALLIGAN

Just like decent nutrition, good sleep habits are essential for maintaining good health. Without adequate sleep, you'll find children's behaviour and school performance deteriorates. It can cause irritability and crankiness, a short attention span and poor social interactions. So if you find getting your children into bed and keeping them there throughout the night a regular waking nightmare, better sleep habits are needed!

For many parents, preventing their children from disturbing their own sleep or the sleep of siblings can be a huge problem. Of course, when your kids are teens the problem shifts as they struggle to get out of bed. Life is cruel!

Just why do parents experience an issue with bed-hopping and bedtime battles? The answer often lies with us, as we can be so inconsistent that inadvertently our children end up training us to reward the behaviour we don't want, for example, by us allowing them into our bed in the middle of the night. There may be other practical issues, such as needing the toilet; being scared of the dark; finding it hard to settle in the evening and putting themselves to sleep. Children and parents both need their sleep and we should be aware that good sleep practices are as important as good dietary habits.

So what can we as parents do to ensure our children and ourselves get a good night's sleep?

TRY THESE SLEEP-INDUCING TACTICS:

1 A 30-minute winding-down routine is a vital way to signpost to the brain that sleep is on its way.

Lie your baby down, tell him it's sleep time, turn off the lights, stay in the room (or just outside) to gently soothe and settle him if he cries, and repeat until he goes to sleep. Give him a few minutes to see if he can self-soothe – don't leave him alone for longer to cry it out, which raises the level of the stress hormone cortisol. If he doesn't

settle by himself, don't pick him up unless he's really distressed, but stroke him and make soothing noises.

For toddlers, a good routine is bath, pyjamas and a story in bed. The warm water of a bath will raise his body temperature and then when he gets out, the core body temperature lowers, promoting sleep. Always reading the same story last may drive parents nuts but it is a good signal that it's sleep time now.

Avoid stimulants in the hour before sleep – no screens, sugar or hyped-up activity. Winding down in front of a film is not a good idea as the light from the screen signals to the brain that it is time to be awake. Speak to your child in a low voice and slow down the pace of your speech.

If your child struggles to settle to sleep, you might like to allow him to listen to some music or talking books. This is his cue for sleepiness.

If you're a working parent, try to avoid coming home in the middle of the bedtime routine as it will disturb the rhythm and excite the child.

2 Make your child feel successful as this will motivate him to do more of what you want. He will have cracked other stages, like learning to walk and talk and potty training, and he can do the same here, but it is going to take time. Refer to these successes.

He may like to have a motivational sticker chart. Maybe he can choose a favourite animal or character that you can use as a template that is filled in with stickers during the course of the bedtime routine. When you tell your child: "It's sleep time now, what do you need to do?" and he says: "Stay in my big bed," put lots of stickers on the chart as well as giving verbal acknowledgment.

When he jumps into bed for storytime, give stickers for being in the right place; when he chooses music to listen to, give stickers for being sensible and following the rules.

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3 Introduce the sleep fairy. Your child can pick one of his favourite toys to watch over him at night and keep him safe. This will help him get into good bedtime habits. Say: "The sleep fairy wants to give you something in your sleep box when you stay in your bed like you did last night; you didn't call out for Mummy and followed most of the bedtime routines like a big boy." The token is quite small and not of any real value – it might be a flower or a feather or a shiny button. Make a huge deal of it and say the sleep fairy will leave a token in the morning to say well done for the effort and progress your child is making to become a successful bedtime sleeper!

4 Acknowledge how he feels. If your child says: "I'm not tired and I need to get something," articulate how he's feeling by saying: "I know you find it hard to settle yourself to sleep. You would rather be racing round the house!" This doesn't mean it's ok to race around the house. If you think he wants your attention, don't ignore him – you need to give your child attention for taking small steps in the right direction.

5 Motivate with descriptive praise. Establish a golden book – get your child to help decorate a notebook and notice the good things they do, around bedtimes and more generally, and write it in the book. Read the golden book after bedtime stories, before you turn the lights out, and this will help you to pay attention to progress made.

Say: "You should feel proud of yourself – I only had to remind you twice last night about where you should be and you stayed in your bed longer than the other night! That's progress. Very soon you will be able to stay in your big bed with no trouble."

Sweet dreams and sleep well, and remember to take care of your own sleep hygiene.

Elaine Halligan is Director of The Parent Practice, an organisation that helps parents bring out the best in their children. Her new book, My Child's Different, is due to be published with Crown House in autumn 2018.