

Sleep Difficulties in Children

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Children have various types of sleeping problems. Some have difficulty falling asleep, some awaken throughout the night and others cannot get restful sleep.

The most obvious causes of sleep problems are physiological ones and these should be addressed with your pediatrician. There may be seasonal allergies causing difficulty breathing, or the child may suffer from asthma. They may have the flu, a stomach “bug” or too much caffeine before bed. These may sound obvious but it is important to rule out these causes before we assume there is some “deep rooted psychological problem”. Once you have ruled out physiological issues, if there are still night time problems, below are some tips that will help you and your children

Remember that the most important principle in parenting is consistency. Create a bedtime routine that is followed exactly every night. Follow the same time line, the same sequence of events every night of the week. It is helpful for the child to slow down gradually throughout the routine. Washing up, brushing their teeth and going to the toilet are a reasonable prelude to a reading a story in bed. Take care of all those things you know they will ask for before bedtime arrives- “I’m thirsty”, “it’s too hot in here”, “there’s a monster in my closet”!

Create an environment that is conducive to sleep: quiet, comfortable temperature, appropriate lighting, etc. I strongly recommend NOT having a TV in the child’s room. However, if you must leave a TV in their room do not let them lie in bed and watch it and do not let them fall asleep with the TV turned on. This essentially trains them not to fall asleep. It sends the signal to the brain that they are supposed to be watching TV versus trying to fall asleep.

Reading is a wonderful way to spend time quiet together after a hectic day. If your child is old enough, let them read to you or alternate reading pages with them. This is not only a wonderful way to help them relax but also a perfect way to instill the love of reading and to take their mind off of their daily struggles.

Many children have difficulty with transitions. Bedtime is when they leave you for the night and it can create anxiety for them. Reassure them that you will be there for them in the morning and remind them of something to look forward to the next day. This should be accompanied by lots of hugs and kisses.

If your child sleeps in your bed and you are ready to put an end to this there are two basic methods. Before you do one of these be absolutely certain that you, and your spouse if applicable, are ready to win the war and not just a few battles. You must be determined to go the distance no matter how many sleepless nights it takes. The first method is “cold turkey”. Tell them in advance that as of a specific date they will no longer be allowed to sleep in your bed. Also inform them that if they are compliant with this they may be rewarded with a special privilege and if they are not compliant they will lose privileges. You may want to include them on deciding what special privilege could be earned. If you use this method DO NOT GIVE UP and DO NOT GIVE IN. Be prepared for them to test you for many nights. The second method for getting children out of your bed once they are used to being there is “successive approximation”. You will explain this plan to them in advance so they know what to expect. The first 2 or 3

nights you have them sleep with a sleeping bag or blanket on the floor next to your bed. The next 2 or 3 nights you move them a little closer to the door of your bedroom. Then each 2 or 3 nights you move them gradually closer and closer to their room and into their bed. Again, be prepared to win the war as well as the battles and be prepared for some sleepless nights. You must be more stubborn than they are!

If your child is content in their bed but simply having trouble falling asleep you can try to relive the pressure by telling them it is alright if they do not fall asleep. Have them lie quietly and rest. Reassure them that resting in bed can be as good sleep and it will not harm them if they do not fall asleep for one night. This helps relieve the pressure to try and make themselves fall asleep. In reality what usually happens is once they relax, they soon fall asleep.

Finally remember this: When you've had one of your worst days ever as a parent; when you are completely frustrated with your child and can think of nothing good to say about them. Wait until they have fallen asleep, go into their room very quietly, and look at them as they rest. Think about how sweet they look and how much you love your beautiful child. Consider all of the things for which you are fortunate and be thankful. Then go get some sleep yourself.