

Sleep Issues

Preventing bedtime battles

1 The Issue

It has been a tiring day at work, and you are looking forward to enjoying a quiet evening. But Junior has other plans – to disrupt your entire evening by refusing to go to sleep! Sound familiar? “I need a drink; I need to go to the toilet; I need the light on; Read me just one more story; I want to sleep in your bed.”

Children resist going to bed for many reasons. Some are not tired, others are scared, but most simply don't want to miss out on what's going on. So they have a range of strategies to achieve their goal of not going to bed – refusing to go, constantly getting out of bed, yelling out for your attention, or having nightmares. How can a parent win?

Children can resist going to bed at any age, but it's fairly common amongst 3 and 4 year olds. At this age children are developing a sense of independence, and want more control. Endless stalling may also be a way of avoiding being in the dark. Pre-schoolers have active imaginations and may fantasize that monsters are in the cupboard or under the bed. At this age, being afraid is a normal developmental pattern. Recognition of a child's fears, together with gentle reassurance that they are safe and secure, will bring peace to bedtime battles.

The following steps are important in helping you win bedtime battles.

2 Check it out

How much sleep does your child need? Keep a record of how many hours your child sleeps per night when she is able to waken naturally. Pediatricians suggest that the average 2-year-old require 12 hours sleep a night, together with a nap during the day.

Remember, you can't make your child go to sleep. No one can do that! Your goal should be to keep your child in bed until they fall asleep.

3 How to Respond

Your first goal is to establish a consistent bedtime routine. A routine provides your child with a realistic expectation of when it's time for bed, and it also soothes a child.

Set an appropriate bedtime.

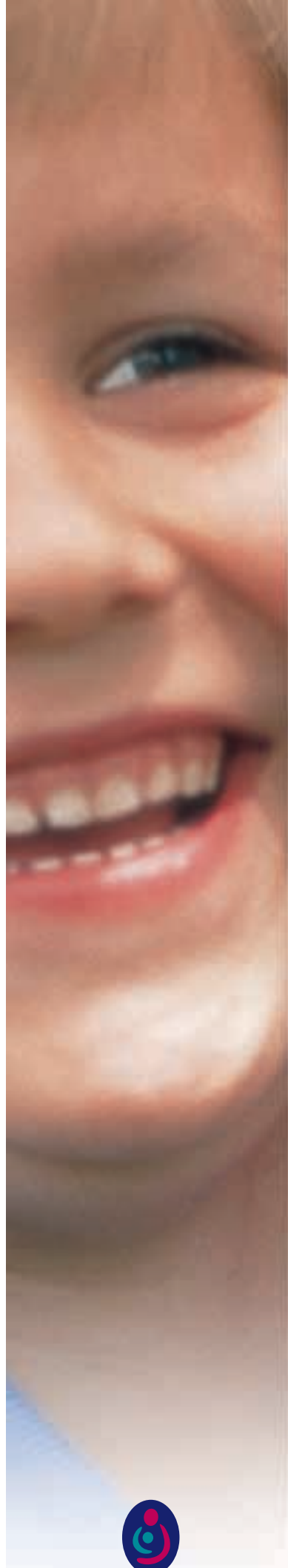
Having recorded the number of hour's sleep your child needs, set a reasonable bedtime. Share this expectation with your child so they know well in advance what time you expect them to go to bed.

Build rituals into your routine.

Children feel secure with sameness. They like to know what to expect. By creating bedtime activities (rituals), the routine itself helps your child get ready for bed. Children also establish their own rituals, like kissing everyone goodnight in a particular order, collecting their favourite stuffed toy to take with them to bed, etc.

Keep the routine simple.

Simple routines are less confusing for your child.



Use a cue to signal approaching bedtime.

Give your child a warning 15 minutes before its time to start getting ready. Your child needs time to slow down before bedtime.

Before beginning the bedtime ritual, calm the activities down.

Hyped up children are hard to settle down. Some calming down activities are reading, drawing, playing quiet games, or playing music that's restful. There are many excellent books you can use for bedtime stories.

Make the routine special.

Make getting ready for bed a special time of the day for your child. This is a time for you to draw your child to you, both emotionally and physically, so she feels close, secure, and loved. When a child experiences feelings of belongingness, they will look forward to bedtime as an opportunity to connect with you.

Be able to end the routine.

Your child won't be suddenly eager to sleep because you have a routine. Initially they will test the limits and see how much they can get away with. But remember, you are the parent - so set limits and keep them.

Insight

Parents, who work long hours and are unable to spend significant time with their child before they go to bed, can find their child resists going to bed. The reason is obvious: Your child wants to spend time with you. And when they have been separated from you all day, they are none too pleased with facing the prospect of being further separated from you when you get home.

If you only have a limited amount of time between getting home and your child going to bed, be sure to spend quality time with them (no TV or reading the paper until after they've gone to bed). If you don't spend this time with them, they will make you pay by disrupting a large part of your evening.