

Skill-Building Opportunities

Bedtime Fears

Question: My three-year-old has recently become afraid of bedtime. What can I do to help him fall asleep?

While you may feel that your toddler's fear of sleep is in direct proportion to how badly you, as parents, crave sleep, take comfort in knowing that the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children awaken from sleep at times during the night, but can return to sleep quickly and peacefully without help from adults. Changes—such as illness, the birth of siblings, and visits from friends and relatives—can temporarily affect already established sleep habits.

Children may require reassurance that they are protected from whatever dangers stir their imaginations and affect their sleep.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

These tips may help.

1

Create a calm and consistent nightly routine.

Transitions can, by nature, be stressful for preschoolers, and bedtime is a transition from the day's activities to getting quiet and ready for sleep. When children are tired, they can also become even more active.

When you create a series of steps leading to bedtime, like a bath, songs, stories and saying what you are thankful for, your child learns what to expect and finds comfort in the traditions. She's learning that these routines signal it's almost time for bed. You might also:

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- Have your child sleep with a nightlight, special blanket or toy;
- Use deep breathing, massage and relaxation exercises with her right before sleep; and
- Tell stories or sing with her before bed. These activities help her focus on something else and begin to quiet down.

Megan Gunner of the University of Minnesota set up scenarios to study how children cope with stress. Some children were able to control a noisy toy, turning it on and off, while other children had no control over the toy's sound and motion. Gunner notes, "The children's control over making things happen was important in helping them decide whether they liked it or whether it was scary."

Children can also make suggestions about what would help them get ready for sleep.

2

Engage your child in problem solving.

You may need to provide additional support to help your child learn how to manage and master the stress at bedtime. The best place to start is by talking with her.

- Share your observation that bedtime seems to be difficult for her.
- Ask her if she has any ideas about what might make it easier.
- Listen to your child's suggestions and set up plans to try them out.

By coming up with ideas to manage stress, she feels a sense of control. She is practicing finding solutions, which is an important part of Taking on Challenges.

Children may suggest ideas you never thought of and would be fun to try out. One boy, for example, made a sword from aluminum foil and that helped him feel safe at night. A girl wanted a pet fish in her room to keep her company. Some children's suggestions might not work. If that happens, ask your child to keep brainstorming until you two come up with an idea that works for both of you.

3

Show your support.

Your child is much more likely to take on everyday challenges if she feels supported and cared for by the important adults in her life. At bedtime, you can:

- Reassure her that she is safe at night. Say things like, "I know you feel scared at bedtime, but I will keep you safe.";
- Do occasional quick "checks" on your resting child;
- Stay in your child's bedroom for gradually shorter and shorter time periods while she falls asleep; and
- Recognize and celebrate your child's efforts, both big and small. Tell her things like, "You tried so hard to stay in your bed. I knew you could do it!" or "You remembered to use your nightlight! That helped you."

When you encourage your child to manage and master her own stress, you are giving a skill for life.