

Sleep

If you are happy with your child's sleeping (or non-sleeping) habits then carry on and ignore other people's comments. They are only a problem if you think they are a problem. If, however, you decide that you are not happy with your child staying up late, having disturbed nights, waking early in the mornings or with your child in your bed with you, then you are being perfectly reasonable to want to change things.

Parents need some time in the evening for their own activities as well as a good night's rest. It is much easier to cope if you know that at seven or eight o'clock your child will go to bed and stay there until a reasonable time in the morning. For your child, learning to go to sleep on her own and to sleep through the night is a vital life skill. We all feel much better after a good night's sleep.

If you are going to tackle sleep habits you must be ready and determined. The most important rule is that once you have started you must not stop, because if you do you will send completely the wrong message to your child, i.e. that she can control you rather than that you control her, and next time you attempt to control her sleep patterns it will be even more difficult.

If you decide to change your child's sleeping habits you will probably find things get worse before they get better. You will probably get less sleep in the short term and at night, when you are tired, you will have to cope emotionally and physically with seeing your child unhappy and distressed. It is probably best to leave sleep training until you are determined to sort it out once and for all. However, if there is any reason why it might be particularly difficult to leave a child to cry (for example, you or another child is unwell or you have friends staying whom you don't want disturbed) it will weaken your resolve. Put sleep training off until you are ready.

- Make sure all members of your family are in support; follow your plan and if possible share the burden so that you can get some sleep.
- Be prepared for it to take some time, but be confident that all habits can be changed if you are strong enough and consistent enough.

The theory of sleep training

Children need to learn to go to sleep on their own. This is the most crucial element and from it stems all good practice. You should be able to leave your child in her bed awake and let her go to sleep. Children will naturally wake during the night, but they should be able to resettle themselves without having to wake you up for comfort, cuddles or company until they go back to sleep.

If your child has problems either going to sleep in the first place or waking in the night, you should consider whether or not she is actually able to go to sleep on her own. Look at her sleep routine and see if she has formed a habit of only falling asleep in certain circumstances, e.g. when you are present, if she has a bottle, if she is in your bed, or if watching TV. If this is the case, then when she is waking in the night she cannot get back to sleep because she has not got her particular prop. You will have to tackle the 'going to sleep' routine as well as waking in the night.

The practice of sleep training

Bed-time routine

Establish a good routine before bed, for example, a bath, a book, and then bed. Don't make it overlong and don't play rough and tumble games which will excite and stimulate her. Make it soothing, relaxing, and comforting.

When it is time to leave her, say goodnight and leave in a confident way.

Ensure that the problem is not a practical one. Check that she is not too hot or too cold. Make sure she is not hungry at night. Some children with sensory integration disorders are very aware of how their bedclothes feel (the texture and weight) so ensure that the bed is made up how your child prefers it.

Settling down

If your child will not settle on her own there are two main strategies. Choose the one which best suits your situation and temperament:

1. Once you have settle your child leave her. If she gets up just keep taking her back to bed saying 'time for bed'. You will have to carry on doing this for as long as it takes. The first night it may be 20 times, but the next night it may be only a few because once she has learned that she is not going to gain anything she will give up and go to sleep. If your child stands up and wails on being left, check and resettle her every five minutes or so (extending the time to 10 or 15 minutes) until she goes to sleep.
2. Alternatively, you can sit with your child until she falls asleep but each night position yourself further away from her. To begin with sit on the bed, then the next day on the floor by the bed, then further away until you are in the doorway...

To make things easier, you could also try settling your child late, when she is really tired and then gradually bring her bedtime forwards by fifteen minutes each day until it reaches an acceptable time.

The crucial point is that you must not give in to your child. If you let your child cry for half an hour and then give in to her, you will have taught her that if she cries enough she will get what she wants. So then the next night she will cry for an hour confident if she goes on long enough you will give in. You want to teach her the opposite; that you are resolute and she will do better to co-operate.

If your child is crying and you find it disturbing, go and find something to do which will distract you, even if it is just doing the washing-up with the radio on.

Waking in the night

Usually children who wake in the night and need to be resettled are those who are unable to fall asleep on their own in their own bed. If you have successfully solved the problem of settling, you will probably also solve the problem of waking in the night. All children, however, may be disturbed by nightmares, coughs, itchiness or other illnesses from time to time, but you should be able to go to their room, reassure them and leave promptly.

If your child continues to wake in the night, you should think about the rewards you may be giving her intentionally or unintentionally. It might be a kiss and a stroke, a drink, a cuddle, a visit to your bed, or even games. You must stop those rewards. Once your child realises that she is not going to gain anything by waking up in the night she will stop. There are two approaches to stopping rewards:

1. Stop all rewards immediately. If she wakes, put her to bed, tell her to 'go to sleep', give no eye contact and just check every five minutes that all is okay.
2. Alternatively, gradually reduce the rewards until she is going back to sleep on her own. For instance, if she is used to a cuddle you could give a very quick cuddle and then put her down, gradually reducing the cuddle over time until it is just a kiss or a pat and then nothing. If she is used to a drink of milk, give water instead and then nothing.

Getting into parents' bed

Children love getting into their parents' bed for a cuddle and play before they get up in the morning. If you are happy for your children to do that then all is fine. However, it is better, if you want to establish a good sleep routine, not to have them sleeping in your bed, even for a short time.

If your child gets into bed with you in the middle of the night then you should take her straight back to her own bed with the minimum of fuss and eye contact and keep repeating this for as long as it takes for her to give up and go to sleep.

Some children can be extraordinarily quiet and can get into your bed in the middle of the night without your even realising it. If your child does this often you can devise something to alert you, a bell on a closed door, for example, and then take her straight back to her bed.

Children who wake too early

If your child wakes too early you should try to ignore her, perhaps leaving her until a little bit later each day until you reach a time that is acceptable to you. You can put some interesting and special toys in her room and place a stair-gate across the entrance to her room so that she cannot get out. Additionally, if your child has the understanding, have a radio, alarm, or light which, when it comes on, is the signal that it is okay to get up.

Daytime sleeping

Some children, like adults, find that a daytime sleep gives them enough of an energy boost so that they do not go to sleep at bed-time. Others are the opposite and find it difficult to sleep if they are too tired. Observe your child's sleep behaviour patterns and see whether she sleeps better with or without a daytime nap. If she sleeps better with a nap, plan one into your daily routine. If on the other hand a nap keeps her up late, try to avoid giving her opportunities to fall asleep such as watching television.

Good beginnings

If you have a very young baby who still needs to feed in the night, you can still start establishing good practice by making sure that at least sometimes she is put in her cot awake and left to fall asleep on her own and that you go to her at night rather than bring her into your bed.

Other points

- If your child is ill, forget about good sleep practice and just wait until she is fully recovered before starting again.
- If you are following the above approach without success, it may be because you are not identifying your child's reward for waking up. Think very carefully about what your child is getting out of waking up.
- Some families find themselves gradually developing extraordinary routines in order to get their children to sleep. If you find yourself in this situation, you will probably need to talk to an outsider to help you change your approach.
- If you have fears and anxieties about your child, they are much more likely to surface at night time and they may stop you from feeling able to leave your child at night. You may need help to address those issues before you can deal with sleep problems.

Further reading:

Newman, S. (1999). *Small steps forward: using games and activities to help your pre-school child with special needs*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.