

Good Night,
Sweet Dreams,
I Love You

NOW GET
INTO BED
AND GO TO
SLEEP!

*How Tired Parents Can
Solve Their Children's
Bedtime Problems*



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CHAPTER 2

Children Need Sleep, and Here's Why

Children and adolescents sleep a lot. As Richard Ferber's sleep chart on page 11 shows, newborns sleep 16 to 18 hours a day and adolescents sleep up to 10 hours a day. But why is that? Is a lot of sleep necessary for children to be healthy and happy? Clearly, the answer is "Yes." Decades of scientific research show that sleep – and lots of it – is a key ingredient for the optimal health and well-being of children during all stages of their childhood. Because sleep is so important, bedtime also becomes an important factor in a family's life.

Children and parents receive many benefits when children get the sleep they need. In this chapter, I'll discuss these five benefits: kids replenish their energy; kids learn to handle distress better; kids learn how to follow instructions; parents become better at using appropriate discipline; and parents get a break.

Kids Replenish Their Energy

Abundant science shows that fatigue can weaken a person's ability to pay and maintain attention, learn, regulate emotions, and maintain self-control. Merely resting can help reduce fatigue, but only sleep lets children "recharge their batteries" with the energy they need to successfully manage a typical day.

From the moment they wake up, children are thrown into a succession of demanding situations. Most, if not all, of these situations require different skills and tasks they have not yet fully developed, and perhaps won't fully develop until they reach adolescence. So, when children do not get enough sleep, the already difficult situation of getting through the morning routine can become a major problem for both children and parents.

For example, let's look at the morning routine on a school day for a young child. The child's first major task of the day is waking up. Even when children have had enough sleep, waking up can still be a challenge. For children, as well as adults, it is far easier to wake up fully when a person likes what is going to happen next. For adults, waking for work is harder than waking for golf, fishing,

or other forms of fun. Children are the same way. Waking for school is harder than waking for play or favorite cartoons. So, for the average child, waking up on a weekday is usually the first step toward an event they are not very excited about: school.

Waking children with some prodding may be necessary, even when they are well rested. But if children are not well rested and have not had enough sleep, they face the task of waking for school fatigued, groggy, and short on the energy they need for a successful school day (paying attention, emotional regulation, and self-control skills).

Waking a fatigued child often requires more than a little parental prodding. Many times, the methods needed – or at least the methods used – are unpleasant: yelling, shaking, or pulling the child out of bed. This sets the stage for what can be a less-than-happy morning routine. And, as many parents have experienced, an unpleasant morning routine can create an incredible amount of friction between children and parents. Usually, everyone ends up starting the day upset and unhappy. This is not good for tired children

because emotional upsets can lead to attention problems, poor self-control, and poor learning. All this results in an obvious fact: A tired, unhappy child is not at his or her best for a productive day in school.

To set your kids up for having the best day possible, and to avoid some of those more harrowing morning routine conflicts, it's important that you ensure your children get the proper amount of sleep. This involves setting appropriate bedtimes and following a positive bedtime routine.

Kids Learn to Handle Distress Better

Children aren't born with a built-in ability to handle distress. They rely heavily on their parents to eliminate or soften sources of distress, ease any discomfort that comes their way, and provide warmth and love when bad or unsettling things happen. A major task during childhood, however, is to learn how to handle distress without parents always having to step in to make things better.

For children to accomplish this task, parents must gradually withdraw their assistance. Parents also must strategically establish limits. Doing this

has many benefits. An obvious one is reducing children's behavioral excesses. By excesses, I mean areas where they go over the line – they talk too much, run too fast, pull too hard, push too vigorously, or generally go too far. Another benefit is that children learn how to increase their tolerance for distress that occurs when limits are placed on their behavior. Limits in and of themselves cause varying degrees of distress for children because children don't want their behavior to be limited. When parents enforce limits, children are required to learn how to cope with and manage this distress.

Now, how does all of this relate to sleep and bedtime? One of the first limits parents must set on child behavior is a sensible bedtime. One widely accepted myth in 20th century parenting was that, if left alone, children would naturally select a healthy sleep schedule and diet. The truth is that, without parental guidance, most children will drink an ocean of soda, eat sweets, ice cream, and chips until they're ready to bust, and stay up well past a sensible bedtime, regardless of when they need to be up in the morning. That's why I believe parents must establish limits in these areas to ensure that children do not undermine

their own health. Simply put, raising healthy children means that you must control your children's sleep schedule and diet.

Most children will fight a sleep schedule because they want to stay up as long as they can stay awake. Parents who enforce a sleep schedule cause some distress for their children every night. But, as I said, this allows children to learn how to manage distress and practice it every night. This practice and learning helps children improve how they handle distress in general and gradually helps them to become more self-sufficient.

Kids Learn How to Follow Instructions

Knowing how to understand and follow instructions from adult authority figures is an important skill for all children to learn. As with any skill, mastery of following instructions requires practice – and lots of it! Opportunities for practice come from the many different interactions that initially take place between children and their parents, and that later occur between children and a wide range of other adult authority figures (teachers, adult relatives, etc.). These

instructions come in the form of household rules, school (from daycare through secondary school) rules, civic and community rules, and others.

One of the first steps in learning to follow instructions involves “surrendering” to adult authority. Here is a bold news flash: **Children are not born knowing how or being willing to follow instructions.** They have to learn this valuable skill. So unless instructions are aimed at getting them to do what they are currently doing, about to do, or already want to do, most children will not follow them unless they have been specifically trained to do so, no matter where the instructions are delivered or from whom they come. It's actually even worse than that for many children. If they have not been adequately taught to follow instructions, they will do what they want to do regardless of what someone tells them to do. There are a lot of words in the English language for this kind of behavior – willful, stubborn, noncompliant, ornery, and so on. There are some Anglo Saxon expletives that make similar points in more powerful, albeit less socially acceptable, ways. I leave it to you to think of your own. However, I prefer

to think of such behavior as evidence that a child lacks instructional control skills and needs training.

So, how is learning to follow instructions related to sleep and bedtime problems? Simple. Just like adults, most children want to stay up late. They lack the judgment to understand that doing this will create problems in the morning. Thus, to ensure that your children obtain the proper amount of rest, you must establish a reasonable bedtime for them. You can start by consulting the chart on page 11 that shows how much sleep children need at various ages, and determine a reasonable time for them to go to bed. Since the bedtime you set will almost always be earlier than what your children want, you must give specific instructions about when to go to bed and then enforce those instructions when necessary.

Following instructions is actually a very difficult skill for children to learn. In fact, it's not always an easy skill for adults. Most crimes, troubles on the job, and civic disagreements involve some degree of instructional control problems. People young and old want to do what **they** want to do, not necessarily what someone else wants them to do. Abundant practice is the key to learning this skill.

Following any instruction requires children to interrupt what they are doing and redirect their energy, attention, and general behavior toward what they have been told to do. Complete details about how children learn this and other skills are included in the next chapter. For now, I want to mention one specific component of this process: practice.

Every night when you tell your child to go to bed, your child practices the skill of following instructions. Children want to stay up late and parents want them to go to bed. When you enforce bedtime rules, and your children surrender to parental authority and go to bed, they practice the skill of following instructions. This practice, night after night, greatly contributes to how well children learn this important skill.

Parents Become Better at Using Appropriate Discipline

Early in a child's life, parents discipline their children with a mixture of minor scolding, redirecting them away from inappropriate behavior, time in, and time out. But as children grow older,

their behaviors become more complex and parents must develop additional ways to discipline.

No matter what age your child is, you don't want to yell or physically punish him or her, especially for something like not going to bed on time. But it does happen. It's natural for adults to get frustrated and angry with children who aren't complying with bedtime rules. The stress of a long hard day can lead some parents to discipline their children in ways that lead to regret or remorse, harm relationships, and simply don't work.

Parents don't have to discipline in destructive ways. As a parent, you can use bedtime as an opportunity to expand your parenting skills. A sensible bedtime can create an opportunity for you to learn and use new ways to discipline. Let's take a look at three new discipline strategies you can use at bedtime.

- As children grow older, they need less sleep. A sensible bedtime for a 4-year-old may be too early a bedtime for a 6-year-old. In other words, older children might have later bedtimes because they need a little bit less sleep. But rather than automatically making the bedtime later for an older child, parents

can use the difference between an existing bedtime and a later one as a reward. This way, parents can have children earn staying up later by meeting certain behavioral standards the parents set down. For example, you could ask your child to consistently follow household rules for a certain amount of time *and* do at least one behavior or task (being particularly nice to a brother and/or sister, helping with household chores, or completing a required task without being asked) that goes beyond that requirement. On days when your child meets the established requirement, he could stay up until the later bedtime. On days when he does not meet the requirement, he would go to bed earlier, nearer his old bedtime. With this new strategy, you would make it clear to the child that regular bedtime is not a punishment; rather, it is the result, or consequence, of perfectly acceptable behavior that didn't rise above routine expectations. To earn the later bedtime, your child must rise above the routine behaviors.

- Another strategy you can use at bedtime is one that classifies as a “punishment” strategy. Here, children who misbehave beyond what you consider to be acceptable or routine are “fined” time, and the time is subtracted from their regular bedtime. One way to do this is to determine the number of half hours between the end of dinner and the regular bedtime and use these half-hour increments as disciplinary units. For example, children whose misbehavior only slightly exceeds household standards could be “fined” one unit and sent to bed a half an hour earlier than their regular bedtime. Children whose misbehavior dramatically exceeds household standards could be sent to bed two or more half hours before their regular bedtime.
- A final example involves using bedtimes that motivate children to do homework. You can require your child to do her regular homework to earn her regular bedtime and have her do extra homework to earn a later bedtime. Conversely, if your child doesn’t do her homework, you can send her to bed

earlier than her regular bedtime. With this approach, the only way she can stay up later is to do extra homework.

Setting a sensible bedtime when children are young, and then maintaining a consistent time as they get older, sets the stage for powerful new options for disciplining children. These are options and strategies that don't involve yelling or physical punishment – things loving and caring parents don't want to use or do. Learning how to use these strategies at bedtime can enable you to use them in other areas of your child's life where discipline is needed.

Parents Get a Break

The final benefit of setting a sensible bedtime is that you get a breather – time to recharge your batteries, both individually and as a couple. You love your children, treasure the time you spend with them, and think about and miss them when you are away. But even the most loving relationships require occasional separations, and the parent-child relationship is no exception. In addition, to help maintain the quality of the parents' relationship with each other, parents need to spend time together,

away from children, friends, and other family. Setting a sensible bedtime creates a healthy separation between parents and their children, and gives parents time to be together alone to nurture their own relationship.

Summary

There are many benefits to establishing a sensible bedtime for children; some are common sense and some are technical. I have emphasized the five benefits I feel are the most compelling. Central to all five is the concept of child learning. How children learn, how the laws of learning can be used to maximize parental teaching, and how learning applies to sleep and bedtime are topics discussed in the next chapter.