

BEDTIME HASSLES

These articles are an excerpt from the book *Positive Discipline A-Z* by Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott and H. Stephen Glenn. If you are interested in learning more about the book or authors, please visit www.positivediscipline.com.

"Our kids drive us crazy every night. They know it's time for bed, but they want another drink of water, one more story, the light on, the shades down, then the shades up. They keep us busy for an hour making extra trips to the bathroom and then scream like crazy when we finally refuse to come to their room one more time. The last straw happened the other night when our eight-year-old cried because he couldn't stay up as late as our ten-year-old."

Understanding Your Child, Yourself, and the Situation

There isn't a kid who doesn't try to extend bedtime at least once in a while. Wanting to belong and be part of the action is a human need. Serious bedtime problems, however, are most often created by parents. The more families establish routines, the more they experience organization and order. Kids function best when they have a routine and a sense of order. It's important for them to have input, but not to run the family. Parents who let kids work them like trained circus animals at night are clearly letting the kids call the shots.

Suggestions

1. Be available during the bedtime routine (see "Planning Ahead to Prevent Future Problems" item 1 below) instead of trying to do ten other things. One reason children seek more attention is that they haven't received a good dose of your full attention.
2. Once you have given your undivided attention for at least 20 to 30 minutes of bedtime routine, stick to the allotted time for the routine to end with confidence. Your children know when you say what you mean and when you mean what you say. They know when there is room for argument and when there is not.
3. After your child is in bed, refuse to play the game. If she leaves her room, gently take her by the hand and kindly and firmly return her to her room. Use no words. Actions speak louder than words, and don't leave room for argument. You may need to repeat this action several times before children learn that you mean what you say and will follow through with kind and firm action. If they come to your bed in the middle of the night, take them gently and quietly back to their bed, give them a kiss and walk back to your room. Do this as many times as you need to until your child knows that your bed is for you (see "Parenting Pointers" item 3).
4. If your children have developed the habit of manipulation, it may take three to five nights of kindness and firmness (returning them to their beds, without words) before they learn they can trust you to mean what you say. Children feel more secure with parents who are kind and firm than with parents who can be manipulated.
5. Sit down with your children and admit your mistake. Tell them that you have allowed them to form some bedtime habits that aren't good for them or for you. This is a good time to start

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PARENTING TIPS

teaching them that mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn, so now you can learn together how to solve the problem.

6. Some parents put locks on the outside of their children's doors to keep them in their rooms. This is dangerous and disrespectful. Keep taking your child back to her room. If you remain kind and firm, it probably won't require more than 10 to 20 trips the first night. Remember that weaning has never been easy for the "weaner" nor the "weanee," but is necessary for both to reach interdependence.

Planning Ahead to Prevent Future Problems

1. Set up the bedtime routine during the day. Let the kids help you make a list of all the things that need to be done before they go to bed (pajamas on, teeth brushed, items picked up off the floor, bathroom cleaned, homework done, clothes chosen for the next day). Working backward from bedtime, figure out how much time is needed and what time the kids need to start to complete all tasks on time. Help them make charts of the things to be done. Small kids enjoy finding pictures in magazines to represent the things they need to do. The charts can be posted on the doors of their rooms.

2. When it is time to begin the routine, tell the kids, "It's time for bed" instead of "You have to go to bed." Encourage involvement by asking questions that involve the children such as, "What is the first thing we need to do to get ready for bed?" Or offer limited choices such as, "Do you want to choose a story or do you want me to?"

3. Some kids find it helpful to play "Beat the Clock" at bedtime. Set a timer for the agreed-upon time, and let the kids scamper around getting everything done before the timer goes off.

4. Let the kids know that you will be available for story time ten minutes before bedtime. If they have completed their tasks, there will be time for a story; if they haven't, there is time for a tickle and a kiss, but the story has to wait until the next day.

5. For kids who think it's unfair that an older sibling stays up later, let them know it's okay to be upset, but it's not okay to stay up later.

6. As the kids get a little older, involve them in discussing bedtime and give them a limited choice, such as, "You can decide if you would like to go to bed at 7:15 or 7:30."

7. As they get even older, let them pick any bedtime they like as long as the adults have "quiet, no-kid time" from 9 P.M. on. Offer kids a chance to stay up a little later on Fridays and Saturdays.

8. Let kids know that bedtime means time to go to their rooms, not necessarily time to go to sleep. Kids are different, and some may like to play or read before they fall asleep. If they aren't bothering anyone else, let them fall asleep when they're ready. Usually if kids can fall asleep when they like, they won't fight parents as much about what time they go to bed.

9. Many parents struggle over bedtime because they are afraid their children will be tired and

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PARENTING TIPS

crabby the next day if they don't get enough sleep. Treat bedtime as a separate issue. If your children are tired and crabby, you can ask them to be tired and crabby in their rooms. They may even take a nap. Earlier bedtimes are not the solution to irritable kids, unless they decide that would help. You might ask, "What do you think would solve the problem when you get tired and crabby?"

Life Skills Children Can Learn

Children can learn self-reliance instead of manipulation skills or dependence on someone else to help them perform a natural bodily function. They learn to respect their parents' need for time alone or time together without children around. They learn that their parents will treat them with respect but will not become involved in their manipulation efforts. Children can learn that they don't always get what they want, that it is okay to feel upset about it, and that they can still survive.

Parenting Pointers

1. It is better to teach children to listen to their inner voices about when they are tired than to insist that you know when they are ready to go to sleep. It is also respectful to yourself to insist on a time the kids go to their rooms even if they don't go to sleep so you can have some time to yourself.
2. Some parents believe they are doing the loving thing by capitulating to the unreasonable demands of children. They are not thinking about the long-range effects of what this teaches children. None of us always gets what we want. Adults complain. Babies and toddlers cry. We all learn that we can still survive and even be happy. It is not respectful to children to give them the impression that they can always have what they want. Since you are giving your children lots of love during the bedtime routine, and at other times during the day, they will not be traumatized by learning that they can go to sleep by themselves. The opposite is true: they will learn the skills of capability and self-reliance.
3. It's fun to let your children snuggle in bed with you on weekend mornings, and we would encourage having a special time each week that your kids can hop in your bed for wholesome family fun time.

Many parents allow their children to sleep in bed with them as a regular occurrence. There are some organizations that support the "family bed." Others believe this is disrespectful to children because it may convey the message that children are the center of the universe and that they are not capable of falling asleep on their own. Instead of teaching self-reliance, it may teach children manipulation skills and dependency.

Extensive research by Richard Ferber, M.D.¹ concluded that children need a place of their own to sleep, whether it is their own bed or a room that is separate from the parents. In this way, the child learns self-soothing and other valuable lessons: I can handle being in my own space and I am not the center of the universe. I am an important member of my family, but my parents are also important and need time for rest and rejuvenation. Parents need courage and skills to follow a plan of their choice instead of feeling manipulated by children into a predicament that

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PARENTING TIPS

is not their choice.

Booster Thoughts

One parent relates: "Our three-year-old continually came out of her room. We walked her back, and she kicked and screamed for an hour the first night until she fell asleep exhausted in her doorway. The second night she cried for half an hour. The next three nights this routine lasted ten minutes. After that, bedtime became a fun time for us all with a pleasant routine filled with hugs, tickles, stories, and cooperation."

Another father found bedtime hassles ceased when he asked two questions while tucking his children in bed at night: "What is the saddest thing that happened today?" "What is the happiest thing that happened today?" After each question, he would listen carefully and then would share his own saddest and happiest moments of the day. This seldom took longer than two or three minutes with each child, although sometimes more time would be required. He said, "I was amazed at how much my children told me when I took the time to ask and to listen. The closeness we felt during these times seemed to help them settle down and be ready for sleep."

BED-WETTING

"My eight-year-old boy still wets the bed. I've heard of all kinds of remedies from waking him up several times a night to getting a sheet that sounds an alarm. They all sound like a hassle for me or a frightening and intimidating experience for him. Any suggestions?"

Understanding Your Child, Yourself, and the Situation

There are many reasons for bed-wetting. Bed-wetting can be the result of a developmental issue, a physical condition, a sign the child is being sexually or physically abused, or it can be a mistaken goal. A child may unconsciously choose a mistaken goal when she experiences some kind of stress, such as a new baby in the house or moving to a new location. The first thing to do is have a medical checkup to see if the problem is physical or developmental.

Suggestions

1. Take a look at what you might be doing to create the need for undue attention, power struggles, revenge cycles, or helplessness. Many parents of bed-wetters create this problem by nagging, reminding, coaxing, and trying to control the child's bladder. Stop! Instead spend special time with your child. Get him involved in family meetings to solve problems, share feelings, and deal with hurt feelings. Give him meaningful jobs to enhance his sense of belonging and contribution.
2. If your family is going through a change that might create stress, such as the birth of a baby, moving, or a new job, spend extra time with your child to increase her sense of belonging and significance. The bed-wetting will stop when she feels secure.
3. Decide what you will do instead of trying to control what your child does. You might want to cover the

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PARENTING TIPS

mattress with a plastic sheet. You might want to make sleeping bags out of old sheets that are easy to throw in the washing machine. You may choose to stay out of his room because you can't stand the smell. Whatever you do, do it with dignity and respect.

4. Instead of compounding the problem by using humiliation, get into the child's world. Ask the child how she feels about the problem, and how it is for her to have this happening. Ask if your child needs help or can handle it by herself. Listen respectfully to what she says.

Planning Ahead to Prevent Future Problems

1. Do not attempt toilet training too early. This invites behavior problems. We suggest waiting until the summer after your child reaches two and one-half before you even start. Of course, there are exceptions to this. Some children start the toilet training process on their own. Our point is don't get uptight about it too early.

2. To avoid behavior problems, take time for toilet training and then stay out of the way. Teach your child how to use the washing machine. Even a three-year-old can handle this job. Also you could teach him how to change his clothes and sheets in the middle of the night if he is uncomfortable. Once you have taken time for training, keep your nose out of his business and let him take care of himself however he chooses. He may choose to sleep in wet and smelly sheets and experience ridicule from his friends.

3. Share respectful stories about bed-wetters so your children know it can be a common problem. Michael Landon wrote a television movie about bed-wetting based on his childhood experience. We have a friend who said that in the U.S. Marines there was a special tent for bed-wetters. The sergeant in charge woke the residents up every two hours.

Life Skills Children Can Learn

Children can learn that their parents respectfully and lovingly help them learn to deal with problems that are physical or developmental. Both parents and children can learn effective ways to interact with each other.

Parenting Pointers

1. One clue that the problem is developmental is if your child has difficulty with bladder control during the day. (See Booster Thoughts.)

2. Another clue that bed-wetting is developmental, in addition to difficulty with bladder control during the day, is if the child is a heavy sleeper and has difficulty waking up in the night. Don't wake the child up, try to monitor his fluid intake before bed, or ask him if he has gone to the bathroom before bedtime. Instead, let him know that some people take longer to develop bladder control, and that you are sure he will be able to handle it on his own schedule.

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PARENTING TIPS

Here's the experience of one family: "We became familiar with our children's bladder control capabilities on family camping trips. If Josh announced that he needed to go to the bathroom, we knew we had about twenty minutes to find a suitable stopping place. If Katey said she needed to go, we knew we had about ten minutes. If Brian announced a need, we pulled over to the side of the road immediately.

"Brian was also a bed-wetter into his early teen years. We knew it was developmental and very embarrassing for him. At the age of fourteen, he was invited to an overnight camp-out with his friends. He stayed up all night because he was afraid he would wet the bed and be ridiculed. We were grateful that we knew his problem was developmental so we didn't add to his problems by hassling him. We simply gave him empathetic understanding and worked with him on many possible solutions. The funniest was our agreement that he would tie a string around his toe. Since I have to get up several times in the night to go to the bathroom, he asked me if I would pull on the string around his toe to wake him up.

"Eventually we became so unconcerned about the problem, and Brian became so good about taking care of his own sheets, that we don't know for sure when he stopped wetting the bed. I think he stopped. I'll ask his wife."

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