

Bedtime Routines for Children

Whether you have an infant, toddler, kindergartner, or preteen, practical discipline strategies and a good bedtime routine can be the difference between good sleep habits and a lot of sleepless nights.

A bedtime routine includes all of the things that you do with your baby or older child just before and up to the time that you put them to bed, such as taking a bath, the last diaper change, putting on pajamas, saying prayers, and reading a bedtime story, etc.

The goal of a good bedtime routine is for your child to fall asleep on his own, without being rocked, watching TV, or with you lying down next to them. This way, if they do wake up later, they should be able to comfort themselves and fall back asleep without needing any extra help.

On the other hand, if they associate falling asleep with being rocked, for example, if they do wake up in the middle of the night, they likely won't be able to go back to sleep unless you rock them back to sleep.

Bedtime Routines Dos and Don'ts:

There is no absolute right way to set up a bedtime routine. Some children like to hear a bedtime story, others may want to talk about their day, and some may just want to say their prayers and go to sleep. As long as your child falls asleep easily and sleeps all night, then your bedtime routine is likely working well.

Bedtime Dos:

Other things that you should likely do as part of a good bedtime routine can include that you:

- **Be consistent:** Your bedtime routine may change over time, as your child gets older, but it should be fairly consistent from day to day, starting at the same time and going in the same order. For example, a toddler's bedtime routine might start at 8:00p.m. and include a bath, putting on pajamas, reading a few bedtime stories, getting in bed, and a final goodnight.
- **Include dental hygiene:** Whether you are cleaning your baby's gums or reminding your older child to brush and floss their teeth, proper dental hygiene is a good habit that you can include in your child's bedtime routine each night.
- **Keep it fairly short:** A good bedtime routine will probably last about 10 to 15 minutes, or a little longer if you include a bath.
- **Make it age-appropriate:** Your child's bedtime routine will change over time. For example, while it is expected for a newborn or younger infant to fall asleep nursing or drinking a bottle of formula, you can try and start putting your baby down while they are drowsy but still awake once they are four or five months old.

- **Offer some choices:** Your child can't choose when to go to bed, but you can let them have some power in their bedtime routine by letting them have a choice over which pajamas to wear and which books to read, etc.
- **Remind your child to use the bathroom:** This is especially important for your younger child who may still have issues with bedwetting.
- **Start early:** It is much easier to begin a good bedtime routine when your baby is young, than to try and change poor sleep routines when you have a toddler or preschooler who still is not sleeping well.
- **Understand that a little crying can be okay:** Some children will cry for a few minutes as they settle down for sleep or when they wake up in the middle of the night. This can be okay if they quickly settle down and you are comfortable letting them cry for a few minutes.
- **Use a night light:** Few children like to sleep in the dark, which makes a night light useful.
- **Use a security object:** A security object, like a stuffed animal or blanket, can be an important part of a good bedtime routine, especially for toddlers and preschoolers. These types of items usually are not safe in the crib for younger infants, though.

Bedtime Don'ts:

Just like there are a lot of right ways to have a good bedtime routine, there are some wrong ways and things you should avoid.

- **Allow stimulating activities before bed:** Especially if your child has trouble falling asleep, you should usually stop stimulating activities 30 to 60 minutes before bedtime, such as playing video games, watching TV, or talking on the phone.
- **Assume that your child will outgrow poor sleep habits:** Unfortunately, if nothing is done, many children who have sleep problems as infants and toddlers continue to sleep poorly even once they start school. The sooner you fix your child's poor sleep habits, including starting a good bedtime routine, the better.
- **Create poor sleep associations:** Rubbing your child's back until they fall asleep, having music playing, or keeping the TV on can mean your child will need help if they later wakes up. And no, simply keeping the TV or music on all night doesn't work. If your child wakes up, they will still cry out for you and need your help to go back to sleep.
- **Drag it out:** If you are not careful, your child will drag out your bedtime routine much longer with repeated calls for drinks, snacks, or to use the bathroom. Try to stick to your original bedtime routine.
- **Give caffeine before bed:** Keep in mind that in addition to soda and tea, caffeine can be a hidden ingredient in other foods, including coffee flavored ice cream and chocolate, etc.

And, remember that if your children are not sleeping through, neither will you.