



by Karen Stephens

Bedtime Tips to Build Good Sleep Habits

It should be no surprise that children with good sleep habits tend to be easier to parent, care for, and teach. In fact, when children in our child care reveal behavior or learning problems, teachers are always sure to ask parents about their child's sleep habits. More often than not, it turns out the child is trying to function at full throttle with too little sleep.

Running low on "zzzzz" is hard enough for grown-ups (as any parent knows all too well). But it's even harder on kids. Childhood is prime growing time. Physical growth and development (including vital brain processing networks) never occurs faster at any stage of life. It's a peak learning time, too. Childhood is not the time for kids to be feeling bushed all the time.

Adequate sleep nourishes kids so their immune system is stronger, which in turn keeps kids healthier. Learning skills, such as paying attention, listening for details, short-term memory recall, and ability to follow simple instructions develop more easily, too. And there's no doubt that kids are less cranky and whiny when they have emotional resources replenished through sleep. Even power struggles lessen as children gradually learn to comply with basic social rules.

So, it behooves all of us to help kids acquire good sleep habits. Those habits, like all others, are best learned from loving, attentive parents. Naps and bedtime provide teachable moments each and every day. Nap and bedtime rituals and routines should be maintained in every home. Specifics of the routines will and, in fact, should vary from family to family. The rituals should be personal to reflect the uniqueness of the family relationships.

Lullabies are a bedtime standard; which one doesn't matter. Song choice can be a defining element for bonding among family members. They become fertile fodder for warm and even wacky childhood memories. For example, four-year-old Katie's bedtime features a bath, story, and then singing "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and the "Mickey Mouse Club Song." Katie has requested the same two songs every single night for the past 18 months! (Yes, parenting requires supreme patience for endless repetition!) Katie's mom and dad (known before parenthood as Leonard and Mary) not only sing the same tunes over and over, but they've found a way to keep interested. Their duet is sung in 1940s swing-style fashion a la the Andrews Sisters.

Who would imagine the odd situations parenting would put you in? Quirky or not, Katie's bedtime routine works for her family. Katie is drowsy within 15 minutes of hitting the sheets. She's asleep by 8:30 p.m. at the latest, which allows her to get the 11 hours of daily sleep her growing body needs.

To help you create a good bedtime routine for your kids, I've listed some basic guidelines below. Please feel free to follow Leonard and Mary's lead. And add your own personal flare when the spirit moves you.

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- Determine how much daily sleep your individual child needs. Our library column “Good sleep and bedtime habits nourish kids,” will help you determine your child’s needs. Observing your child’s behavior will also give you clues.
- Create a specific routine to follow every bedtime. Naptime routines are usually shorter than bedtime routines.
- Follow your child’s lead in creating bedtime routines. Some children like a bedtime story or a back rub, others don’t. Respond to your child’s natural cues rather than forcing something. The goal is for children to identify their personal sleep cues.
- Clearly communicate and consistently follow the sleep routines you establish. Exceptions to routines should be rare and few, even when you travel.
- Establish a specific sequence to bedtime routines so children can learn what to expect. Repeated routines help children recognize environmental cues that signal bedtime. A reasonable routine would be: brushing teeth, then a warm bath, followed by pajama time, story, and then lullaby. A prayer or moment of gratitude can be included, too. Some families create special games, like making wishes on stars or children putting dolls to bed as part of bedtime preparation.
- Establish simple, respectful consequences to enforce if a child doesn’t cooperate with the bedtime routine. For instance, if a child won’t put on pajamas willingly, perhaps that night’s story will be missed.
- Limit children’s intake of sugar and caffeine, especially in the hours before bedtime. Beverages, like sodas or chocolate milk, aren’t for bedtime.
- At least 30 minutes prior to bedtime start a wind down to the evening. Avoid exuberant active play or loud energizing television shows or videos. Action-adventure programs delay sleep rather than foster it. Violent programs can contribute to nightmares or interrupted nighttime sleep.

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- Create a calming atmosphere prior to bedtime. Play quiet table games, draw together, or play with play dough.
- Reduce sources of anxiety. Nervous, scared kids can’t sleep. Children’s imaginations can lead to invented or exaggerated fears. A night light casts a cozy glow. A hallway light left on to shine through a slightly opened door works, too.
- Eliminate distractions. Don’t have the television or radio blaring after kids go to bed. Frequent parties and boisterous visitors interfere with kids’ sleep.
- Friendly conversations and quiet music can help children relax into sleep. Many kids like the security of knowing others are still awake. They want someone awake keeping an eye out for them. After all, it’s brave for kids to go to sleep. They know that during sleep they are completely vulnerable.
- Promote serenity. Avoid loud family arguments, whether between parents or parents and teens. (Not a bad tip for any time of day.)
- Ward off loneliness. A doll, stuffed animal, or special blanket is an invaluable sleep aid to many children — the softer and more well loved the better. Some children become particularly attached to a specific pillow, pair of pajamas, or even bed sheets. Trust their instincts and don’t belittle their preferences. Children (like adults) vary widely in their responses to subtle differences in texture, color, and scent of materials.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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