

BEDTIME WITHOUT HASSLE

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It is important to establish a routine is at bedtime. Bedtime seems to be a common difficulty for most parents. Everyone is usually tired and stressed by the end of the day which only makes matters worse. See if this sounds familiar:

"Zachary, time for bed."

"No!" Two-year-old Zachary responds, running toward the playroom.

Mother follows close behind, pleading, "It's time for bed, honey. C'mon, now."

"No, Mommy, no!" squeals Zachary as Mother swoops down to pick him up.

Zachary's body stiffens, his back arches, and he begins wildly kicking his feet in order to free himself of her tightening grip.

"Stop it! You're going to bed, NOW!" Mother declares, not to be outdone by her child's resistant behavior.

Zachary begins to cry loudly as Mother, greatly exasperated, pulls off his clothes for his impending bath. This emotional and physical power struggle continues through Zachary's bath, pajamas, tooth brushing, and abruptly ends with a token goodnight kiss.

Exhausted and frustrated, Mother proceeds down the stairs hopeful for some solitude, only to hear,

"Mommmy, I want drink. Me go potty!" Mother

angrily responds with the requested water and a brisk

trip to the bathroom. Mother sets him on the bed and says evenly, "Don't let me hear another word. Good night!" Mother stomps down the stairs after slamming his door. Zachary is left huddled on his bed, crying into his pillow and Mother leaves feeling guilty and frustrated.

"Many times going to bed is not the real issue"

Now, look at this same scene through the eyes of the child. We parents get accustomed to looking at this scene through our "adult eyes" and miss the opportunity to understand it from our child's perspective.

Imagine that you are in the middle of a good book and your spouse says, "It's time for bed." In spite of your response, "No, I'm not ready just yet," you are helped unwillingly up the stairs, your clothes are removed and you are forced into taking a bath. Consider how you are feeling. Are you feeling disrespected, violated, angry, or controlled? You may be thinking, "Yes, but a two-year-old doesn't feel this way -- it's not the same, he's not an adult Besides, I'm the parent." True, the child is not yet an adult. However, he is a person and has feelings. He is at an important growth stage of wanting independence and experimenting with how to have his choices be known and honored.

Many times going to bed is not the real issue, he may be tired and ready. Yet the command of being told what to do and when to do it brings up a feeling of being controlled. And isn't it true that this is often our reaction as adults when we are "commanded" in the same way? The

issue becomes one of wanting control over what happens to us. As Mother continues to overpower Zachary, he feels unloved and rejected.

Bedtime can be a special time between parents and children as it is natural for us to desire closeness or connectedness before going to sleep. Often times, however, parents have overburdened themselves during the day. They are eager to get the child in bed as soon as possible so they can have some quiet time for themselves. This can cause the child to feel his parents are trying to "get rid of him." Our children's desires for more closeness can be expressed through wanting a drink and "going potty."

What does your child want?

- To declare his independence or sense of self.
- To feel close or connected with his parent.
- To feel a sense of control over what happens to him.
- To feel respected and heard.

How can you, as a parent, give your child what he wants and needs and still have him go to bed in a timely manner?

1. **Respect your own needs.** Take care of yourself during the day so that you are not feeling hassled and frazzled at your child's bedtime. Set your child's bedtime at an hour that allows you some solitude and/or "couple time" with your partner after your child goes to bed.
2. Whenever possible, **have both parents be a part of the bedtime ritual.** Bedtime is more fun and less of a burden when both parents participate.
3. **Start your bedtime ritual early.** Get it started forty-five minutes to one hour before your child's actual bedtime hour to avoid unnecessary stress and struggle. Make the snack and drink part of the ritual to avoid after bedtime requests. This process should be a winding down time, in other words, eliminate activities that would excite the child such as roughhousing or tickling.
4. **Respect his sense of time** by telling him that bedtime is in 10 minutes, allowing him to complete a particular activity before his actual bedtime hour.
5. **Offer choices instead of orders.** Your child will have a feeling of control over what happens to him when given choices. For example, you might say, "Do you want your Dad to help you with your bath or me?" or "Do you want to sleep with your gorilla or your kitty?"
6. **Create a bedtime ritual** with your child's help and advice. For example, read a story, snuggle, say prayer, give a hug and two kisses and leave the room singing a song. The routine needs to have a quality of sameness or routine -- the same order or the same song -- in order to provide a sense of security.

7. **Create closeness.** For example: Talk about "Remember When," such as "Remember when we went camping and that raccoon got into our food stash?" or "I remember when you were a little baby and loved to have your tummy rubbed."

Say three things that you love about each other. Start each statement with, "What I love about you is..." and complete it with a specific thing you love. For instance, "What I love about you is the way your singing can lift my spirits."

Ask the following questions, which allows your child to share more about himself, such as: "What was the best thing that happened to you today?" "What was the silliest thing that happened today?" "What is one thing you would like me to know about your day?"

You can make bedtime a time of nurturing, closeness, shared communication, and fun.

Some children may talk more freely with the lights out. Try to discover what is most encouraging to your child in enhancing your communication together.

After you have completed your bedtime routine, leave your child's room. Explain to your child once when you start this new bedtime routine, "If you come out of your room for any reason other than emergency, I will lovingly guide or carry you back to your room. I will not talk to you after saying good night and closing your bedroom door."

It is important that you do not talk to your child after the bedtime routine is complete. If you continue to talk with your child, you are more likely to get into a verbal power struggle. You may have to guide your child back to his room several times, particularly at the beginning because children will test their parents. However, as the week progresses, bedtime will become more pleasant for both you and your child.

You can make bedtime a time of nurturing, closeness, shared communication, and fun. By involving your children in the decision-making process and spending this special time with them, they will feel valued and respected.

When you have order and routine, it creates a sense of security in your child because he learns he can depend on certain events always occurring.