

# GOODNIGHT TODDLER

## BEDTIME FOR KIDS

### AGES 18 MONTHS - THREE YEARS

#### S L E E P

Something  
Lost  
Every  
Evening by  
Parents

If this definition fits your household, you are ready for a good night of sleep. Everyone needs sleep to refresh and restore her mind and body. We can cope with "just about anything" during the day if we have a full night of sleep.

Your baby may have slept through the night as an infant and now wakes several times each night. Or you may still be waiting for that night when she does finally "sleep through the night." Either situation creates exhaustion, frustration and guilt for parents. As your baby moves into toddlerhood, new challenges in her sleeping pattern may develop.

Good sleep habits can be learned by children and encouraged by parents. A child who is waking several times a night or missing out on even an hour may be sleep-deprived. He is not able to "be his best" when he is awake because his body and mind are not fully rested. He may be grumpy and unpredictable.

A child can "adjust" to an abnormal sleep pattern. You can too! Your family life does not run smoothly because of disrupted sleep. You may feel out of control. You are exhausted and frustrated with yourself and your child.

#### WHAT IS EXPECTED AT THIS AGE?

Kids need about 12-14 hours of sleep. (This includes daytime naps.)

Each child is unique!

Almost all children are night wakers at some time during the first five years of life. (We are all in this together as parents.)

Only about 50% of all toddlers sleep through the night at age two.

Separation anxiety is an issue for a toddler. Going to bed means leaving Mom and Dad for the whole night.

Fears are strong and may seem irrational.



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

Your toddler is struggling to be independent. He wants to be in control. He may resist bedtime and naptime.

Special circumstances can trigger wakeful periods. These include a new baby, babysitter, teacher, bed or house; problems with school, daycare or friends; an illness or death in the family; and changes in a parent's marital status.

Eliminating naptime is not necessarily the answer. A child who does not nap could become so overtired that he can't relax and fall asleep at bedtime. Moving the time of naps to best fit your child's bedtime may be a solution to a more pleasant sleep routine.

You can encourage change in your toddler's sleeping pattern. To make these changes, the entire household will need to cooperate and support one another.

The sleep challenges of toddlerhood generally fall into **three main categories - getting them to bed, keeping them in bed and middle-of-the-night waking.**

## GETTING THEM TO BED

MISSING THE "FUN" . . . We must think like a child to understand this issue. Adults see sleep as a pleasant event, a respite from their busy lives. Kids see it as a negative event. They think they are missing out on something fun. (What happens after I'm in bed?) They feel deprived of the love and attention of Mom or Dad. They miss being near you. They feel the separation.

In some families "going to bed," at any time of the day or night, is a struggle from infancy on. In other families, the struggle begins when the child starts to assert his independence.

BEDTIME ROUTINES . . . What is the easiest way to get them to bed? You need to establish a bedtime routine.

**You can't control your child's going to sleep. You can only control your child's bedtime.**

The two purposes of a bedtime routine are (1) to ease the transition from being awake and with the family to going to sleep and being alone and (2) to signal the time to go to sleep or back to sleep.

You will want the routine to be pleasant, calming and consistent. It must be simple enough to do each bedtime. Your toddler's bedtime routine will probably change as he grows and has new needs or wants. The following is a list of suggestions for establishing a bedtime routine:

Try to put your toddler to bed the same time every night. Sameness helps to make him feel safe and predictable.

Give your child a signal that bedtime is coming soon. Set a buzzer for ten minutes and say, *"When the buzzer goes off it will be time to take a bath."*

Make your interaction quiet and calming with your child before bedtime. Learning to take care of her body can be part of the routine – brushing teeth, bathing or washing, putting on pj's and a drink of water.

Include books as part of your routine. Be prepared for requests for "just one more book." Decide on the book limit and let your child choose his favorite bedtime books. Be firm on the number and then carve out a time in the morning or sometime the next day for the requested "last one" to be read.

Encourage a favorite blanket or stuffed toy to offer comfort from fears and provide security in your absence.

Singing and rocking are very relaxing activities.

Talk about the day's activities and about what tomorrow will bring.

Turn on a CD of soothing music. This may also help with the loneliness.

Turn on your child's favorite nightlight.

A tight hug, sloppy kiss and one last tuck can create the snug feeling of security.

Make one of the parts of the routine happen in bed. This may make getting your child there a little easier.

If at all possible, take turns with the other adults in the household putting your child to bed. This may help to prevent the child's insistence on the same adult always putting him to bed.

You and your toddler can decide on the routine that is best for both of you. The same routine can be followed for both bedtime and naptime.

## KEEPING THEM IN BED

**CHILD'S VIEW OF SLEEP . . .** As your child grows and ventures over the sides of the crib or is now in a "big bed," you have no rails to contain a resistant sleeper. You now have a new challenge. **Once I have him in bed, how do I keep him there?**

We must remember that children view bedtime and sleep as "missing the fun." So a natural reaction is to get out of his bed and come out of his room to find "the fun!" He also views this as a separation and that may bring out various emotions in both you and your child.

### SUGGESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO TRY:

Respond to your child's requests by **going to him**. Decide how many glasses of water or how many "good-nights" you will allow before firmly announcing, *"That's it, good-night!"*

It takes some children longer to relax and fall asleep. Promise you will return in five minutes to check on her--then do it! Praise her for staying in bed before your return. Extend the time before checks. **CAUTION:** Be sure she isn't staying awake for your next check.

It may help your child to have a little part of you still with him at bedtime such as a slipper, a bathrobe, etc.

Some children may need a winding down period before falling asleep. Listening to music or looking at books for a certain length of time determined by a set buzzer may provide this time before a final tucking-in and a kiss.

**HOPPING OUT OF BED . . .** Sometimes, no matter how many different bedtime approaches you try, your child may still hop out of bed! He may laugh, cry, call for you, run around the house or ask you a million "one last questions." This can be very exhausting as well as frustrating for already tired parents.

Here are a couple of possible solutions:

A "baby gate" placed at the door will let him know he needs to stay in his room. Two gates placed above each other will make it more difficult for the adventuresome child to escape. The room must be safe and you only hope he eventually goes back to his

bed to fall asleep. The gates do allow both of you the freedom of seeing each other. (Locking the bedroom door is not advised because of emotional and safety factors.)

"The Endurance Challenge" --- Calmly lead your child back to his bed each and every time he gets out. (It may be 32 the first night!) Avoid eye contact. Remain calm. Do not get angry. Do not talk except to repeat a simple phrase such as, "It's time for you to be in bed." If you remain calm and are consistent for several nights, this game will become tiresome for your child.

Be sure to offer lots of praise in the morning after a successful night of staying in bed. Offer praise again during the next night's bedtime routine.

## MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WAKINGS

You have a set bedtime routine. Your child goes happily to bed, stays in bed and falls asleep without resistance; however, sometime during the night she awakens! Everyone comes to lighter states of sleep during the night. In these lighter states of sleep it is possible to awaken with the need to get back into a deeper state of sleep. We will look at some of the challenges of nighttime waking and possible solutions to these challenges.

**FEARS . . .** As your child's world widens, she develops fears of various kinds. She may begin to worry about sirens, dogs that bark or monsters in the dark. She may be able to manage her fearful feelings during the day; however, they may surface when she is in her bed alone and able to think about them. Many of her fears may be associated with nighttime and going to bed.

Don't make light of any fear. These feelings are very real for your child, however ridiculous they may seem to you. Talk about your child's fear and explain it as best you can. Try to understand the cause of the fear and help support her as she works to control her fearful feelings.

During this age when fears are appearing, it is more important than ever to limit her TV time. Many shows on TV are potentially scary for a toddler or early preschooler. A bedtime routine and a pattern of self-comforting will help your child handle the separation and fears. Encourage a "lovey," such as a blanket, doll or stuffed animal.

Rebecca Huntley uses this explanation about dreams and nightmares:  
NIGHTMARES/BAD DREAMS . . . As stated earlier, young children often become their most fearful at bedtime when they are tired. At this age they have a healthy imagination and are confused about the difference between real and unreal. At bedtime, your child's fears, real or imagined, may become part of his dream and turn the dream into a nightmare. This dreaming occurs during the middle and latter part of the night as he transitions in lighter states of sleep. Older toddlers and preschoolers often have nightmares in which they are being chased by animals or monsters.

You can help your child manage these nighttime wakings involving nightmares by teaching him about dreams. This teaching can be done during the day when your child is calm and receptive. Your teaching may include some imaginative play about both happy and scary situations while staying in his bedroom the whole time.

*"Katie, did you know that our imagination works even when we are sleeping? In good dreams your imagination puts you in happy, fun places. You can pretend to be swimming or playing or running--but it's just your imagination. But really, you are still asleep in your bedroom. In bad dreams your imagination puts you in scary, bad places...sometimes with scary, bad things or people. It feels very, very real--but it is just your imagination. You are still asleep and safe in your bedroom. When you have a bad dream, first, turn on the light and look around to see you are still in your own room. Find your special bear--snuggle down tight and go back to sleep. You can even leave the light on in case you want to look around some more."*

~ Rebecca Huntley,  
The Sleep Book  
for Tired Parents

NIGHT TERRORS/SLEEP TERRORS...Many children begin to experience night terrors at this age. You hear him scream and run into his room to find him sitting up with his eyes open, trembling and sobbing.

A night terror is not a bad dream. It is often confused with nightmares, but it is actually very different. Night terrors or sleep terrors often occur during the deepest sleep, usually within the first two to three hours after going to bed. These terrors do not happen during the dreaming state. Despite your child's wide-awake look, she is not awake. She will be difficult to comfort because she is in transition of sleep states.

SLEEPWALKING...About 15% of children have one or more episodes of sleepwalking. Almost all children will talk in their sleep at one time or another. Children who walk or talk while sleeping do so during the deepest stage of sleep. They are not acting out a dream. The cause may be immaturity of the nervous system that in turn interferes with their transition between deep sleep and light sleep.

Sleepwalking seems to be more common in boys than girls. Your child may just sit up in bed, have his eyes open, move around some and talk a little. He may also get out of bed and walk around his room or the house or actually leave the house. While your child has his eyes open, he is not awake and will not be aware of his surroundings, including you, nor will he remember the incident in the morning.

## **WHAT DO I DO WHEN MY CHILD WAKES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT?**

### **When your child wakes crying:**

#### **NIGHTMARES**

Go to your child, but do not overreact.

Hug and reassure him.

Be sure your child is really awake so the dream won't continue.

Stay with him as long as he needs the comfort to return to sleep.

Remember, dreams happen in the middle to latter part of the night.

#### **NIGHT TERRORS**

Don't try to wake a child in a night terror.

Reassure your child by softly hugging and holding him.

The less you do, the better.

Remember, night terrors happen within the first 2-3 hours of sleep.

## **WHEN YOUR CHILD CRAWLS INTO YOUR BED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT**

### **THE FAMILY BED**

Many families find this to be a solution to nighttime waking. You will need to decide if this is an option for your family.

### **THE ENDURANCE CHALLENGE**

Calmly lead your child back to his bed each and every time he comes into your bed. This may be 25 times the first night! Avoid eye contact. Remain calm. Do not get angry. If you remain consistent for several nights, this game will become tiresome for your child.

### **CAMPING-OUT**

This is a gradual method of encouraging your child to stay in his bed throughout the night.

Lay a sleeping bag on the floor of your room. When your child comes in, he has a readymade bed.

In time, you may move the sleeping bag into his room. When he wakes in the middle of the night, he can crawl into the sleeping bag on the floor in his room.

He may then decide that he would prefer to stay in his bed!

## **WHEN YOUR CHILD WALKS AROUND THE HOUSE**

### **SLEEPWALKING**

Guide your child gently back to bed. Talk softly and reassuringly.

You may decide if you want to wake your sleepwalking child or not.

Make sure your child remains safe. Put a gate at her door, or hang a bell that will wake you up if the door is opened. Be sure windows and doors in the house are locked.

### **JUST TO PLAY**

Guide your child back to bed and announce that it is time to sleep.

Again keep her safe. Put a gate at her door, or hang a bell that will wake you up if the door is opened. Be sure windows and doors in the house are locked.