

Toddler Sleep

Checklist

- Fill the needs for power, experience, connection.
- Play out power struggles using role reversal games.
- Use a visual routine.
- Use calming activities before bed (music, deep breathing, essential oils, etc.)
- Treat sleep as gift, not a punishment.
- Use Success Training to help your child stay in bed.
- Explore fears, rather than ignoring them.



Fill the Needs

for power, experience, connection

All kids have three basic needs: power, experience and connection. Everything your child is already doing is meeting those needs (This is part of Language of Listening® - the three-part parenting framework I use).

When kids want to connect, they will fight bedtime and continue to come out of bed in order to connect. If kids feel powerless and desire control, they will fight bedtime in order to fill their need for power. And if kids want the experience of sleeping in your bed, they will continue trying to experience it if they don't see another alternative.

In order to help your child meet his or her need for connection, use SAY WHAT YOU SEE®.

This is a technique where you describe what the child is doing, saying, feeling or thinking. This is the step of validation and connection for kids. If you don't know what to say, a wonderful default I love to use is, "You wanted..." and then add in what the child wants, or wishes for in that moment. The more you use SAY WHAT YOU SEE with your kids, the more your child will feel heard and understood. When a child feels heard, he or she feels connected to you.

If order to help your child meet his or her need for power, look for things your child CAN DO to feel in control.

Meeting a child's need for power is often overlooked, but it is usually the primary need at the beginning of a bedtime battle because children feel powerless when they can't get what they want. This might be choosing the pajamas they wear, the order of the bedtime routine, the books you read, or the game you play during teeth brushing. When kids feel in control, they stop trying to control others.

To help your child meet his or her need for experience, grant your child's wishes in fantasy.

"You wish statements" help meet your child's need for experience in fantasy when he or she wants something and can't have it. The more detail you add, the more real it will feel to the child.

It might sound something like this: "You wish you could stay up with mom. You wish you could stay awake, come down stairs, eat a big bowl of ice cream with sprinkles and watch TV. You'd love to stay awake all night long and never go to sleep for 1,000 nights."

If your child cracks a smile, starts to calm or joins into the fantasy story like mine do, you'll know you're on the right track. Once you're on the right track, you can go back to SAY WHAT YOU SEE.

When you follow along and validate, kids feel heard and understood.

The added connection prevents escalation.



Play Out

power struggles using games

Children don't say, 'I had a hard day [...] Can we talk?' They say, 'Will you play with me?'" - Lawrence Cohen.

Using play is a powerful tool to help your child stop using behaviors you don't like and start using ones that you do. If your toddler keeps coming out of bed or your toddler keeps waking up at night or if you can't figure out how to put a toddler to sleep fast, turn it into a game.

Allow your child to play the role of the parent while you play the role of the child. Play your game during the day or long before it's bedtime.

Have your child tell you to stay in bed and stop coming out.

- > Then cry in the room and try to sneak out.
- > Allow your child to find you and put you back to bed.
- > Follow the child's lead with the game; let the child take you where they need to go.

Kids know exactly what they need and will meet their needs (power, experience, connection) through play. Keep a close eye on how your child acts out the parent role -- that's likely how they perceive you during bedtime.

You'll know kids are on their way to meeting their own needs when they ask to play the child role again. Continue playing the game on a regular basis until the child asks to stop.



Use Visual Routines

especially with toddlers

"In a large study across several countries, researchers found that having a consistent bedtime routine is directly related to better sleep: Children who had a regular bedtime routine fell asleep faster, had an earlier bedtime, had fewer night wakings and slept longer than children who did not have a regular bedtime routine!

The relationship between having a bedtime routine and sleep was dose-dependent, meaning that the younger the child was when the routine was started, and for each additional night that the bedtime routine was used, the better the quality of sleep for the child." -- Ashley Soderland, Nurture and Thrive

You can add another layer to your toddler's routine using a daily printable schedule for kids. When toddlers see the routine, they are more cooperative and able to follow along. Eventually toddlers begin to follow the routine with less and less prompting, saving time!



Sleep Is a Gift

not a punishment

Parents can often fall into the trap of using sleep as a punishment: "That's it! If you don't clean up the toys right now, you're going to bed!"

If our son wouldn't pick up the toys before bed, the consequence was not sleep. There was no more, "You're going to bed right now." Instead, if he didn't pick up the toys, he lost the toys the next day. That was just the rule.

Look for ways to re-frame your bedtime routine as a very special time with mom or dad.

"It's your special time with mommy (or daddy)."

"It's your snuggle time. We get our bodies clean, comfy and cozy."

"Snuggle time feels so good!"

Then talk to your child about ways sleep benefits the brain and body, using language they can understand.

"Did you know the more you sleep, the faster you will be able to run and play?"

"When you sleep, your brain moves all the things you learned today into the right spot!"

"Did you know that you need more sleep than mommy (or daddy) because your brain and body is growing super fast?"

"Sleep helps heal all your boo-boos faster than if you didn't sleep!"



Success Training

to help your child stay in bed

Success Training is another tool from Language of Listening that I love to use. To help a child learn to stay in bed, it might go something like this:

After going through your initial bedtime routine, start by offering to let your child set a time for you to check on him or her (like in 2-5 minutes) so she can experience success in staying alone and in bed, set a timer, and return on time a couple of times.

Each time point out a STRENGTH -- any little thing she did right--you didn't move (stayed under the covers, on your bed, in your room like you said below) that whole time! After a couple of successes, point out that shows she trusts you to come back noting how long she stayed in his bed and how hard that must be since this is a new routine.

Then see if she is ready to try another minute between visits (or 2 or 5 depending on how quickly she is adapting to this new routine), and try that a couple of times. Keep checking and extending until she is asleep. The first few nights it will take A LOT of your time, but you should see progress every night.

As your child's confidence grows, she will choose a longer time between visits, and you will know she is on her way to going to sleep on her own without a struggle. If she comes out before the time of the visit, she may not believe you right away or may be worried you is tricking her. If so, you can adjust the time down until you find the success point and restart there. It may go back a forth a while at first before seeing steady progress.

Each time she finds a way to stay in bed or stay calm, name those STRENGTHs. Coaching your child, she can start to help herself through the situation.

"You stayed in your room for a while even though you didn't want to."

"You found a way to stay calm at bedtime. That took a lot of self-control!"



Explore Fears

rather than ignore them

When kids are afraid of something, and they hear, "There's nothing to be afraid of. You're fine!" it creates a disconnect. In an effort to feel heard and understood, the child will intensify his communication to prove to you his fears are very real.

The only way to help a child truly move past fear is to validate the feeling.

"You saw monsters in your room somewhere. And wow, that just really stuck with you. There's something about it that you can't let go. And you want to feel comfortable. Right now, you think the only thing that will help you feel comfortable is me laying down next to you and sleeping. Hmmmm....there must be something we can do to help you feel comfortable AND fall asleep on your own."

Follow the child's lead, validate the emotions (no matter how illogical it seems).

And remember...it's only a sleep problem if it's a sleep problem for you. Try different things and see what feels right to you. Trust your gut.

