

How to Develop Bedtime Routines

How to create one that works for you and your child.

Pleasant bedtime routines ease the transition from being awake to being asleep by helping children feel more secure and comfortable about what they can expect at the end of every day. To create a bedtime routine that works for your toddler and that will serve him and you for years to come, put together a predictable sequence of events that you can consistently follow in the same order every night. The actual routine will evolve and change as your child grows, but the basics remain the same. At this age, the bedtime routine might involve the process of putting on PJs, brushing your child's teeth, and reading him a good-night story. Or, your routine may involve a bath and a song, and a story, and another song, and a glass of water, and another story. It's up to you to decide if you want to make it quick and easy or if you want to allow 20 to 30 minutes for special and exclusive time with your child for reading, snuggling, and being together.

Bedtime routines work best if you reserve the hour before bedtime for quiet play. This will lower your child's activity level and prepare his nervous system for relaxation. Roughhousing, running, playing tickling games, and even watching action-packed TV shows or videos make peaceful transition to sleep especially difficult. The following illustrates beneficial routines. Yours can be anything that works for you and your child:

- **Set a specific time and stick to it.** Your child's body clock will adjust much more quickly to the routine if the routine follows a natural and consistent pattern.
- **Give a warning.** Just before bedtime, give your child advance notice that the day is winding down. Your child may be too young to judge time yet, so saying something like "five more minutes" is not likely to be understood. Instead teach your child by association. Begin the first part of your routine -- running the bath water, putting the toys away, or however your particular routine begins to signal the start of the wind down. Some parents signal impending bedtime with the ringing of a kitchen timer for five minutes; the child learns that the sound means bedtime. This allows an impersonal third party to announce bedtime and reduces the desire to complain, since even a toddler knows that you can't argue with a machine.
- **Offer a snack.** A light snack that includes both protein and carbohydrates -- for example, a small piece of cheese and one half slice of whole-wheat bread -- will induce sleep and help her stay asleep through the night. The carbohydrates make her sleepy, and the protein will help keep her blood sugar level on an even keel until breakfast. Be sure to brush her teeth after she eats.
- **Give your child a warm bath.** By raising your baby's body temperature slightly, you'll make him more prone to sleepiness. Also, playing with his bath toys allows him to relax.

- **Get dressed for bed.** Choose comfortable, non-binding pajamas, that are neither too warm nor too light.
- **Read a favorite story to your child.** This is a particularly comforting routine for your toddler, particularly if it's a favorite story that's associated with bedtime, such as *Goodnight Moon*. (As your child grows, he'll want more stories and more variety.)
- **Play soft music while you read.** It's okay to let the music play as the child drifts off.
- **Make sure your child has a friend to sleep with.** A favorite doll or teddy bear provides comfort.
- **Limit or eliminate bottles.** If your child needs a bottle to fall asleep, make sure it contains only water. Milk, formula, or juice can pool around her teeth causing cavities, even in infants.
- **Keep last "goodnights" brief.** Say "goodnight" when it's time for you to leave the room and try not to come back if your child calls for you. This sounds harsh, but if you keep coming into the room you will have taught your child that "If I call to Mommy, she'll come back." Kids learn how to "condition" parents very quickly! *Any* hesitations on our part may be picked up by your child as an indication that maybe you really aren't serious about this bedtime business and if she yells loudly enough you'll come back and play some more.

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