

Growing Concerns

A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson

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Question: I am in bedtime hell! My one-year-old boy won't go to bed unless he is held to sleep. I've been using the "cry it out" method, but it is so painful to hear. My 3-year-old's routine consists of our lying in bed with her reading and singing songs. She won't let us leave, and when we do she screams and cries. We end up falling asleep in her bed because we're so exhausted. Can we reason with a 3-year-old? How can I get my evenings back with my spouse?

Answer: In all the years I've worked on parenting issues I think I've heard more questions about bedtime than any other topic. Whether it's an infant waking parents up all night, a toddler who won't stay in his own bed, or an eight-year-old refusing to leave his video games and put on his pajamas, bedtime battles wear parents out. Bedtime hassles have different meanings for children of different ages. A one-year-old is in the throes of intense attachment issues, just learning to manage brief separations from mom and dad. And he doesn't yet have the advantage of language skills to help him express his feelings and understand why he needs to go to sleep on his own. In contrast, a three-year-old usually is more readily able to go to sleep on her own if the parent's expectations are clear. And her more advanced language ability enables her to understand the plan. But she also may be caught up in rivalry with the one-year-old, demanding her share of your time and attention at bedtime. Especially if you're working during the day and not having much one-on-one time with her, she may see bedtime as a time when she can get your full attention. If you're like lots of working parents, you may even feel guilty that you have too little time with her. And that can make you more vulnerable to her bedtime pleading.

Although the following steps will need to be adapted to each child's stage of development and level of understanding, the principles of managing bedtime should be helpful with both of your children:

- **ANTICIPATE BEDTIME** by easing into calm, quiet activities at least an hour before "lights out." A warm bath, a soothing snack, snuggle

time in cozy pajamas, soft music, and dim lights can set the stage for a good night's sleep. Sometimes it helps if mom and dad are in a robe or pajamas too so the kids don't feel like they're going to miss out on fun activities.

- **ESTABLISH A BRIEF COMFORT ROUTINE** as you settle each child into bed. Tuck the children in with a favorite blanket and stuffed animal, read a short story or sing a lullaby as you gently rub their back, and tell them in a soft voice what tomorrow holds in store.
- **BE CLEAR UP FRONT ABOUT WHAT YOU WILL DO DURING THIS BEDTIME RITUAL.** Especially with your older child who can understand what you tell her, spell out the limits of what you will do (for example, one story and one song), then do no more and no less. If she cries, tell her you know she's unhappy, but that it's bedtime now. Then say no more. Although it may take several nights, she eventually will discover that you mean what you say. But if you give in to her cries, your actions will speak louder than words and you will be back where you started.
- Especially with your one-year-old who is in the habit of falling asleep in your arms, **GRADUALLY DECREASE THE AMOUNT OF PHYSICAL CONTACT NECESSARY TO GET HIM TO SLEEP.** For example, you might rock him for several minutes, then put him down in his bed when he's relaxed but awake. Then pull a chair next to his crib and gently stroke his back. After a few nights you could just sit next to his bed silently reading a book of your own or listening to soft music, without rubbing his back. And, after a few more days he may be ready to fall asleep to the soft music even when you're out of the room. (If music is too stimulating, he may be calmed by steady "white noise," such as the hum of an electric fan.) At this age, he needs to see that you are there to make sure he's safe and comfortable, but that you also trust that he can learn to sleep on his own. If, after you leave his room, he continues to cry for more than a few minutes, check to make sure he's OK, pat his back and speak softly, but leave him in bed.
- **PRAISE PROGRESS.** Your three-year-old will be able to understand when you tell her how proud you are that she stayed in her bed and didn't cry after her bedtime story. The next morning go in to get her out of bed with a big hug and a reminder of what a good job she did with bedtime the night before. The trick is to be matter-of-fact and unemotional when setting bedtime limits, but expressive and enthusiastic when recognizing your child's success.

- GET A BABYSITTER ONE NIGHT A WEEK to give yourself and your husband a break. This also can help your children learn to adapt to going to bed under different conditions. In the long run, that will be good for them and you.

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