

## Banish Bedtime Battles by Marilyn Suttle

**N**ot everyone has trouble putting their kids to bed, but many do. If you are one of them, I'll bet you have a friend or two who doesn't understand your dilemma. Their kids trot off to bed early every night. They seem to have a natural body clock that welcomes sleep while your kids have no off-switch. It's enough to make you wonder, 'Why me?'

Some kids are happy with a predictable bedtime schedule. Others are not. Some kids are afraid of bedtime separation or they simply aren't tired. Others find bedtime boring compared to what they would rather be doing.

Suppose you ask a group of adults, 'If you could go to bed early or do something else, what would you choose?' Of course, we sleep-deprived parents would opt for an early bedtime. However, many would rather unwind with a good book, complete unfinished tasks, or maybe even go out for a night on the town.

Like adults, it can be hard for kids to stop what they're doing and go to sleep. Unlike adults, they scream, kick, cry, sneak out of their rooms, and keep asking for one more story . . . one more TV show . . . one more drink of water.

There isn't anything wrong with your kids. They are being clever little scientists, experimenting to see which behaviors get them what they want. Here are some skills to help put an end to bedtime battles.

- **Look at bedtime from your child's point of view.** It's easier for kids to cooperate with a parent who shows compassion for their feelings and wishes. The more you ignore their point of view the longer they resist. Acknowledge your child's objection to bedtime without using it as an excuse for them to stay up. Here are some examples:

*'It sounds like you wish you could stay up and play.'*

*'It can be hard to sleep when other people in the house are still awake.'*

*'You wish you could hear one more story.'*

Acknowledging their desires helps kids feel understood. It's easier for them to cooperate if you first put their feelings into words. Be careful not to

follow the acknowledgment with the word, 'but.' Saying, 'I can see how much you want to stay up with mommy, BUT you have to go to sleep now,' is like saying, 'I understand your feelings BUT I don't care.' Instead say, 'Even though it's time to go to bed, I can see how much you want to stay up with mommy.'

A few days after a lunch time workshop, a mom was so amazed with her results, she wrote them down for me to share with other parents. Here's how it went:

Mom: '*Goodnight.*'

Child: 'I don't want to go to sleep.'

Mom: '*If you could stay up, what would you do?*'

Child: 'I would draw with my new crayons.'

Mom: '*What would you draw?*'

Child: (yawning) 'I'd draw big pink flowers.'

Mom: '*What else?*'

Child: '... a yellow sun. ... and tall green grass.'

Mom: '*You would enjoy drawing a picture.*'

Child: 'Yeah ... Goodnight Mommy.'

This child enjoyed having her desires put into words, relaxed and fell off to sleep. I imagine you are thinking, '*That would never work with my kid.*' You might be right. Not every skill works every time with every kid. However, when you take the time to describe what your children wish and feel, it defuses the tension and helps them settle down.

- **Connect with your child.** If you haven't set aside a block of time to connect with your children, they may demand your attention at bedtime, even if all they get is negative attention. A child is willing to spend a lot of time in misery, to get a little time when dad finally gives in and lets him curl up on the couch to watch TV or mom lays down with him until he falls asleep.
- **Replace commands with positive expectations.** When you say, 'You have to go to bed NOW,' you set up a challenge. Out of their own sense of self respect they feel compelled to defy you by saying, 'No I don't.' Instead say, 'I can't wait to see how cuddly you'll look snuggled up in your bed. I'll expect to see you there as soon as your teeth are brushed and dazzling

white.’ Talk in a way that puts them in a positive light when they cooperate rather than making them feel defeated by your dominance.

- **Create a predictable routine.** There is comfort in routine. It helps form habits that become automatic to kids. Here is one typical routine: bath time, put on pajamas, brush teeth, story time, talk about what they were grateful for today and what they are looking forward to tomorrow, goodnight kisses and lights out.

One set of parents I know choose to take turns sitting in a chair in their kids room, every night, until they fall asleep. One parent spends about an hour finishing up household cleaning, while the other sits in silence. They say, ‘This works for us. The kids are only little for a short time. It won’t be long until they won’t want us in their room.’ This plan isn’t for everyone. If mom sat in their room, impatient and frustrated every night, or if dad resented losing time with his wife, it would not be an appropriate plan.

- **When a child continues to get out of bed regardless of your best efforts, replace yelling, threatening, bribing and hysterics with the following:**
  1. Hear your children’s concerns and put their feelings into words, such as, ‘I can see how much you wish you could hear another story.’
  2. State your feelings or expectations. Here’s an example: ‘Even though you feel like getting up, I expect you to tell yourself to stay in bed.’
  3. Enroll your child in coming up with possible solutions. Do this during the day, when neither of you feel the pressure of a fast approaching bedtime. Children love to be solution finders. See what you can both agree upon. When kids come up with solutions, they are proud to see their ideas succeed.
  4. If the child still continues to get out of bed, Use no more words, just predictable actions. This means calmly walking them back to their room without talking or hostility. The less emotionally charged you are, the easier it is for your child to calm down and stay in bed. You may need to repeat this step many times. When your children can predict with 100% accuracy that you will remain calm and follow through, they will see no benefit in repeating it anymore.

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