

Straight Talk about Sleep

10 Tips for Getting Your Little One to Sleep

One of the biggest issues parents face with toddlers and preschoolers is lack of sleep. Without sleep the whole family is miserable. When parents are deciding what to do about lack of sleep they feel conflicted about which way to go, “should I let my child cry or not?”

Many parents feel like they can’t stand to put a child and themselves through all the crying. Many fear too much crying will release the stress hormone cortisol and that could be dangerous to their child. From my research, and I could be wrong, crying does not automatically release the stress hormone, it has to be very vigorous crying for a prolonged period of time. Other parents say they could deal with some crying but fear it will go on for hours. No matter what, a parent has to decide how they will handle lack of sleep and whether or not they’re willing to have crying be part of the process.

Since making decisions about sleep is a personal family choice, my goal for this piece will be to keep my opinions about this issue to myself. I believe that as your child’s parent you know what will work best for you, your child and your family. There isn’t just one way to do anything in parenting or in life for that matter. So do a little bit of this and a little bit of that until you find what’s perfect for your child.

What you *will* find in this e-report are 10 short tips filled with things to consider when deciding what to do. I will also mention different sleep training books that you can read if you choose too.

There are definitely health related issues that can contribute to lack of sleep. Things like reflux and too many other things to mention here. For that reason if you suspect anything medical is contributing to lack of sleep then you should have it checked out by a Dr. before attempting any sleep training.

Tips for getting your little one to sleep:

1. There are no toddlers or preschoolers, at least none that I’ve met, who say to their parents, “thank you mommy and daddy, I’ll be putting myself to sleep with no fuss from now on.”

In most cases there will be crying when you sleep train a child.

The important thing about the crying is to understand what it means. Crying is your child’s attempt to bring things back to what they consider normal. Normal for a toddler or a preschooler is what happened last night, and the night before, and the night before that.

Crying doesn’t mean the method you’ve chosen to use is failing; it means you’re in the middle of the process. The crying is your child’s way of saying, “I don’t like this. I like sleeping with you!” Your child doesn’t understand the concept of *loosing sleep* or that you want private time with daddy. They just want things to be as they have always been.

2. Your child is not manipulating you or plotting to disturb your sleep so they can rule the house.

Barring any medical issues your child’s inability to go to sleep and stay asleep is a result of your choices.

My son woke up every 30 minutes for the first 10 months of his life. He had some severe health issues when he was born and I had to monitor his sleep to make sure he was still alive. As he was healing we realized that our behavior, regardless of the fact that we *had* to be there when he woke

up, meant he would see us. Seeing us sent a clear message to our son—mom and dad are part of the sleep process. We help you fall asleep, we're there when you wake up and we help you get back to sleep too. Even after he healed we were still bound by our choices. We had interfered with his natural sleep process; we were what created his problem with sleep, even though it was critical to his survival. Therefore we were the ones who had to start making changes. There wasn't going to be a magical day when my child was going to decide "I don't need you now, I can get myself back to sleep all by myself." A habit had been created. And since he was so young he had no idea there were any other options. He thought having us part of his sleep process was the way it was supposed to be, so naturally he would be upset when I tried to change things. Just like you I wasn't sure what to do. We did what we had to do because my Dr. was threatening to put me in the hospital if I didn't resolve the lack of sleep in 1 week! A great many things in this e-report come from the things I learned about sleep with my youngest child.

3. Part of being a parent means learning to tell the difference between what our child's needs are and what we wish, dream and desire for our child.

Some children need the structure of the Cry it Out method. And yet for others it can be totally overwhelming.

Your child is either a tension-increaser or a tension-reducer. Only you know which one your child is. Some children need to let off a bit of steam by crying for a few minutes before they can fall asleep. If they're not given the chance to cry a little bit they just can't seem to fall into a deep sleep. For those children the Cry It Out method, or CIO, is really what *they need*. If after doing a CIO session with a tension-reducer she wakes up fully rested and acts as if nothing has happened, then you've hit the nail on the head, she *needs* to blow off some steam before she sleeps. Doing any form of CIO may not be what *you want* for her, but it may be *what she needs*.

Note: A tension-reducer may wake up the first few times after having cried a bit before falling asleep sort of upset and calling out for you. This is her way of checking to make sure the remaining part of her sleep routine is still the same, the part where you come and get her when she wakes up. To a small child everything is like a puzzle, first my parents do this, then I do that, then they do this. When changes are made to her "puzzle", her routine she has to re-shift things in her mind. It takes a little while for all the pieces to fit together in this new configuration.

To decide if your child is a tension-reducer ask yourself, when she cried a little bit how long did it take before she fell asleep? Did it take more than an hour or did it take less than 20 minutes? Also look to see if upon waking she was really, really upset or just letting you know, "hey that was different. I need to re-adjust the way things go in my mind now and that may take a few days!"

On the other hand, if after a CIO session with a tension-increaser he wakes up still crying more than normal, can't seem to calm down or is more fussy than normal, then the CIO method may not be for your child. You'll need to consider co-sleeping or do some research to find a non-crying version of sleep training. Begin by looking at the books mentioned in tip 10.

When deciding if your child is a tension-reducer or tension-increaser try to decide based on your child's clues and needs, not on your comfort level or wish that you didn't have to do this. Only you will know who your child is—trust yourself.

4. Have you ever woken up disoriented and not sure where you are?

Most children need the same environment and methods used at bedtime to help them when they wake in the middle of the night.

Have you ever put a child to sleep in one place and then tried to sneak her into her bed? She almost always wakes up just as you lay her down. That may be happening because most children need to fall asleep and wake up in the same place. Dr. T. Berry Brazelton did a sleep study years ago where he found that the way you put a child to sleep at bedtime is what she expects when she wakes up in the middle of the night. If you rock her until she drops off, then she expects to be rocked to sleep when she wakes up. Many experts agree that the reason some children fall asleep, then open their eyes, then fall asleep, and then open their eyes again is because they're checking to see if their surroundings have changed since they fell asleep. My older son did this for a long time. He knew we would lay with him until he fell asleep and he also knew that we would leave as soon as he was asleep. So he would fall asleep and then wonder if we were gone yet and pop his eyes open. Most of the time catching us rolling off the bed!

Consider two things.

One, decide where you want your child to wake up in the middle of the night and put her to sleep there at bedtime.

Two, make sure you're really okay with how you put your child to sleep at bedtime. You know the rocking, feeding, singing, swaying because in order to get her back to sleep you'll most likely need to do the same things again in the middle of the night. Repeating the same methods in the middle of the night could reduce her anxiety enough to allow her to fall back to sleep more easily.

Note: Of course like anything else in parenting, if what you're doing is working or changing it would be a bigger mess—then by all means DON'T CHANGE IT.

5. I know my son isn't tired because he's still running around! I guess he just needs less sleep.

Children don't show sleepiness the same way adults do.

When an adult is sleepy they yawn and have trouble keeping their eyes open. When a toddler or a preschooler is tired, they tend to get wound up. They do get cranky, and they do yawn, but they also get wired and run around. The running around makes adults think the child isn't ready for bed yet. The wild behavior can confuse parents causing them to make the wrong decision and let the child stay up even longer. Less sleep can actually contribute to more misbehavior during the day and lowers the immune system causing more colds too. Children really do need about 10-12 hours of sleep at night. Start the bedtime routine about 1 hour before bed so you can help them settle down.

6. We take the same roads to work and stop at the same coffee shops because it brings us comfort.

Routine is King.

Some may think this tip is silly but it really does help. Create a routine and stick to it. A routine sends clues to your child that bedtime is coming and it's time to settle down. I know that a great many parents are coming home from work just when the kids are getting ready for bed and they want to spend time with their child so they rough house or allow them to stay up late. *Don't do it especially if your child is having sleep issues.*

Instead of rough housing or letting the kids stay up late have the parent who is just coming home be the parent in charge of slowing things down. Let them be the parent who does the bedtime routine so you can spend time with them.

Here's an example of a family routine:

- About 2 hours before bed turn on some lamps instead of the over-head harsh lighting.

- About 1 hour before bed begin cleaning up and stop all wild play.
- Begin talking in quieter voices and do a lot of hugging and snuggling.
- Put on soft music, just make sure to reserve the music you'll be using to help them fall asleep for bedtime.
- Run a warm bath and put a ½ cup of regular table salt into the bath water. The magnesium in the salt relaxes muscles.
- Try *Gerber Lavender Bath*. Lavender is very powerful and can help children get sleepy.
- Then snuggle up for 1-3 books.
- Try a daycare trick. Pick some classical music, sounds of the ocean or white noise on at about the same time in the routine every night, maybe after they get out of the bath. This sends them the “time for sleep” message without you having to say anything.
- Keep the music really low and remember if you use it at bedtime it may be helpful to use it in the middle of the night too.
- Tell your child he doesn't have to fall asleep immediately but he does have to stay in bed. This reduces the anxiety he may be feeling about the fact that he isn't falling asleep the minute mom and dad leave the room. That anxiety can cause him to get out of bed, which causes you to get frustrated, which causes yelling and so on and so on. Just telling him this allows him to relax, talk to himself and he may fall asleep before he knows it!
- Give your child a laminated “get out of bed 1 time” pass. This allows him to get out of bed one time a night instead of calling you back time after time or attempting to sneak out of bed so he can have one more interaction with you. When a child is in charge of a “get out of bed 1 time” pass he gets to decide when he's going to use it. That allows him to stay in bed thinking about when he should use his one time out of bed and he'll most likely fall asleep in the process!

7. I hear my friends and relatives talk about co-sleeping, they think anyone who does that is weak.
Co-sleeping is not evil.

When considering co-sleeping keep in mind that in most cases co-sleeping is a long-term project. Co-sleeping is a situation where your child will eventually decide, “okay I've had enough. I want my own space.” However that may not happen until age 7, 8 or 9. Know that in order for co-sleeping to really work, unless you can sleep with a foot in your rib or in your face, you will need a huge bed. You can achieve that by taking a king size bed and placing a twin on either side or at the bottom of the bed if your room is large enough.

You will also need to decide what the rules of co-sleeping will be in your family.
 Will you lay with your child until they fall asleep each night?
 Will you fall sleep for the evening at the same time the children go to sleep?
 Do you have a “private room” for mom and dad?

Parents need to have a private space not only for time together but to discuss things away from little ears. Without that special place the interest you have in your relationship may begin to dwindle. Relationships require work; they don't stay healthy all by themselves. Trust me, I have been married for 30 years! You need to decide *as a couple* what you want to do about sleep. I've met many moms in my career that have unconsciously given their nighttime attention to their children instead of sharing time with their partner. That can easily drive a huge wedge into the heart of a marriage.

8. Who doesn't love the warmth and coziness of another body?
Warmth may help.

There is a big difference between the warmth of a mother or father's body and a child's mattress. The cool mattress could be sending a clue to your child that they're being put into their beds and that could be enough to wake them up. Try getting a warm-water bottle and laying it in the crib or bed while you're feeding or reading stories. Make sure to remove it from the crib or bed and never let a child sleep near or with a hot or warm water bottle—no matter how old they are!

9. I have *no* trouble saying no during the day, I just can't seem to say no at night.

Sleep training is creating a boundary

While pregnant many of us thought breastfeeding would be simple. We became shocked when we realized there's a learning curve for both mother and baby. Mom has to learn how to position the baby and breast correctly and baby has to learn how to latch on and stick with the feeding until the hind milk arrives. Sleep is no different. Some children, many more than you would think, need to *learn* how to get themselves back to sleep after they've gone through the REM (active) cycle of sleep.

When you're thinking about what you want to do to achieve more sleep, think about this. Most parents have no problem enforcing a boundary when it comes to misbehavior during the day, but at night they see sleep training as abandonment. If you're one of those parents you need to know this.

Be really sure of the method you're choosing to use before you begin to use it and try to stick to it. If you don't, you will have set an unfortunate precedent. Your child will use her immature thinking process and decide, "when my parents make changes and try something new, I can change their minds with lots of crying" even though the reason you stopped the method is not based on her crying. Just try to be clear about what you want to do one way or the other. It's true we're all guilty of starting one method or using one form of discipline and then changing our minds. I'm just saying try to stick with whatever you decide to do instead of changing back and forth. The reason I mention this tip is because your child's foundation is being set during the preschool years and their experiences are what they refer back too as they grow. If you switch back and forth their experience will be that mom and dad don't ever stick with anything, I can wait them out or make a big fuss and they will change back to the way it was.

10. Sleep, like relationships are difficult topics.

That's why there are a ton of books on the subject!

My goal for this piece was not to tell you what to do, but to share some tips to use no matter what method you choose to implement to get more sleep. Here's a list of books that go into great detail on the subject. I'm sure I've left some really good books off this list, sorry about that.

For my final tip I suggest you go to the library and scan these books first to see if they feel like a good match for you and your family. Then absolutely go and buy the one you've chosen. Trust me you'll refer to this book off and on for a while and you won't want to be without it in the middle of the night. Plus you can mark up your book or use post-its or paper clips to show you where the important passages are. Also feel free to download this e-report to help you in the middle of the night as well.

- The No-cry sleep Solution for Toddlers and Preschoolers: Gentle Ways to Stop Bedtime Battles and Improve Your Child's Sleep, by Elizabeth Pantley
- Sleep Solutions for Your baby, toddler and Preschoolers: the Ultimate No-worry Approach for each Age and Stage, by Ann Douglas

- Sleepless in America: Is your child misbehaving or Missing Sleep? Mary Sheedy Kurcinka
- Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems: Revised Edition, Richard Ferber M.D.
- Healthy Sleep Habits Happy Child, by Marc Weissbluth

Thanks for reading and have a good nights sleep!