



“Having a place to read with your child, rather than you hopping into bed with her, lends itself to a quick and easy exit from the room when it’s time for “lights out.”

# quit the bedtime battle

Strategies from OHbaby! sleep expert Dorothy Waide for getting your rebellious toddler into a successful going-to-bed routine

**A**re you one of those parents who dreads the evening routine and wonders where you have gone wrong? Do you wonder what happened to that lovely baby who grew into a child who knows no boundaries?

Here I set out the best strategies to avoid the fight in the first place and, for those of you in the middle of the battlefield, some advice on how to restore peace.

## a routinely normal day

Many parents feel that a structured evening routine will avoid the battle at bedtime, however, in my experience, it's more important to have a well structured routine for the entire 24 hours.

A good daytime routine includes ensuring that your child, wherever you are and whatever you are doing, has the opportunity to eat healthy foods at regular intervals. While convenience foods may appear to save you time, unhealthy choices and too much processed food can affect a child's behaviour. So a little time spent preparing a well-balanced meal can pay dividends in avoiding the time spent battling with your child to go to bed. Whether you're three or 30, no one really likes to go to bed on an argument.

Some exercise is important too so plan that into your day. How often do you hear a parent say, "They'll sleep well tonight" after an afternoon spent running around in the park? Toddlers in particular can spend a significant part of the day in buggies and car seats so it is a good idea to be conscious of the exercise that they are getting during the day and build in some active time.

Toddlers and other young children

should have a meal routine similar to this:

**7am: Breakfast**

**10.15am: Morning tea**

**12.30pm: Lunch**

**3pm (no later than 3.15pm): Afternoon tea**

**5.15pm: Dinner**

The evening routine should look something like this:

**Bath**

**Milk (if they still have it)**

**Clean teeth and toileting**

**Stories**

**7-7.30pm: Bed**

## boundary-setting

During the day it is important to nurture within boundaries, dealing with our toddlers/children in a positive, rather than negative, way.

It is important to ensure that you carry out consequences. For example, if you say to your toddler, "If you don't do this then we won't do this" then you can expect that nine times out of 10 she will go ahead and do it anyway. It's at this point most parents fail to follow through. But you do need to enforce the consequences, otherwise how else can you expect your child to understand the boundaries you have set?

It is good, though, to avoid spending the day at loggerheads, so choose the battles that are key to how you want your child to grow up. I do this on a scale of one to 10 and for an action that rates over seven or eight, I will impose and follow through on a clearly stated consequence.

Intervening by distraction for the younger child works well, and for the older child it is all about keeping boundaries intact.

Once you have your day time sorted then look at the evening routine.

The first step here is to ensure that you allow enough time for your child to have her evening meal and then prepare for bed. Rushing a toddler or child will tend to put stress on this part of the evening and provide more ammunition for the evening battle.

Avoid the dinnertime battle too as, in a lot of cases, this is where the bedtime battle actually starts. It would be great if toddlers and children ate the same food as their parents. Offer a balanced meal and place it in front of your child. You can certainly have one of her favourite foods on her plate but always encourage her to eat the other foods as well. If she refuses to eat it then the only thing I would offer in replacement is a piece of plain bread and glass of milk.

A lot of the going-to-bed issues are because the toddlers/children are overtired and so are the parents!

Whatever your steps are to ensure a relaxed evening routine talk to your partner and have your plan firmly in place. You do need to make mistakes to get it right so don't be too hard on yourself. Depending on the age of the child you can explain what the plan is so that she fully understands how the evening is going to work.

Some toddlers will start after dinner saying, "no bed, no bed", my answer here is: "Well let's go have our bath — bath time is fun."

Take away the negativity with positive responses and deal with the moment and not with what will happen later on in the evening.

Once you have an established evening routine that you are happy with and

# LOVE OUR... SLEEP SYSTEM

## Stage

1

0-4 MTHS

LOVE TO...  
**SWADDLE UP**  
ORIGINAL/ORGANIC/LITE



## Stage

2

4-8 MTHS

LOVE TO...  
**SWADDLE UP**  
50/50



## Stage

3

4-36 MTHS

LOVE TO...  
**IN VENTA**  
SLEEP BAG

Our goal from day one has been to help your baby achieve longer, better quality sleep.

Through true innovation, we have developed a unique range of products simply known as the Love To Dream Sleep System.

Available from all leading baby stores.



that remains consistent over a few weeks, then it's okay to be 80% consistent from then on and have the 20% flexibility built in. If the evenings start to fall apart again then go back to the 100% consistency until everything calms down once more.

What activities you do with your child after dinner can also have an impact on the bedtime routine, so avoid television and books that do not have a calming influence. I avoid television after dinner, however if your children do watch television look and listen to the TV programme through their eyes and ears. Also, some books can be quite scary so again choose an appropriate book for this time of the evening.

Over the years of watching parents with their bedtime routines, I have found that having a place to read with your child, rather than you hopping into bed with her, lends itself to a quick and easy exit from the room when it's time for "lights out".

A chair or sofa in the room or just curling up on the floor to read a story works well. Alternatively, a cuddle or story time on your bed is good idea.

In addition to a story, some children react well to having their favourite doll or cuddly toy tucked up and put to bed as well. Whatever you choose to do keep it short and sweet and don't allow it to get dragged out.

Once you have put her in bed have a special "sign-off" (this can be made more meaningful by doing something slightly different with each child). This small detail makes the child feel that she has a special time with Mummy and Daddy before going to bed and it acts as a final signal that it's time to go to sleep.

This ritual should also be kept short, such as a kiss on the nose or, my favourite, a quick song that I have made up:

"Hush little child, time to sleep. Hush little child, I love you." I sing this as I am switching off the light and leaving the room.

Ideally, once you leave you shut the door. This gives your child her own space and for the younger ones stops them coming out of their room. It also helps minimise those unwanted night visits. If an older child wants to have the door open leave it slightly open and if, in particular where earthquakes are common, use a door wedge to keep the door slightly ajar so it won't jam if you need to get into the room in a hurry.

### classic bedtime battles

What about the battles that start after your child has been put to bed? Ways of dealing with the classic bedtime battles are as follows:

### for the wanderers

Put your wanderer into bed and leave the room. Then implement what I call "door patrol". One parent stands outside the door and each time the child comes out you take her back to bed. There's no need to verbalise as this will only reward negative or unacceptable behaviour. I continue to do this and, after 20 minutes of the child getting out of bed and taking her straight back to bed, I will then explain that it is goodnight time and time to go to sleep.

Eventually she will get the message and find that, as she is not getting any attention and not getting further than the bedroom door, there is little point in battling over going to sleep.

If there is no improvement after 10 nights then I would suggest putting a gate at the door so that she can open her bedroom door but not get any further than the gate. If you do this ensure she doesn't have a stool or chair that she can drag over and use to climb out.

Once you have installed the gate, put your child in bed as usual and leave the room. When your child wanders out take her back to bed and explain that if she gets out of bed again then the gate or door will be closed. If this happens then it is important that you put her back to bed and close the gate or door. Then it stays shut and doesn't get opened again.

Leave your child to settle for up to 20 minutes and if she is not settling then go in and once more, state that it is goodnight time and time to go to sleep. I would explain that if she stops crying and lies down and goes to sleep you will leave the gate or door open. You may find that you will have to do this 20-minute routine twice before she will go to sleep.

### for the company seekers

If your child screams the house down demanding you stay in his room, then try this technique:

Put your child in bed and leave the room. After a time that is acceptable to you (I would suggest no longer than



A fabulous range  
of childrens  
products



20 minutes) go back into the room and explain that it is goodnight time and she needs to lie down and go to sleep. You can then either leave the room and repeat the same cycle again or stay. If you decide to stay, then after the first 20 minutes you will need to reiterate that it's goodnight time and that you will stay in the room only if your child lies down, stops crying and goes to sleep. This is what you also say if you give her another 20 minutes of settling time and go in again.

On both counts it is important that you leave the room for a few minutes if she doesn't stop crying and lie down. This gives you the opportunity to go back into the room to reinforce the message that it is time to go to sleep. This time, regardless of whether she continues to cry or not, you stay in the room as you have not given her the instruction that you would stay only if she stops crying.

In the beginning you may need to stroke her forehead or face or rub her back or hold her hands. Find something that will comfort her or you may be able just to sit there next to the bed.

If the child is active and tries to engage you in talking or playing then sit with your back to her and ignore her or pretend to go to sleep on the floor. If you are having to stay in the room for a period of time take it as time for yourself and sit and answer your emails or texts. With your back turned the light from your phone shouldn't affect her ability to go to sleep.

If you start with comforting by touch then over time you need to remove yourself away from the bed and closer to the door. So, day one to five you may be sitting next to the bed comforting, day six to 10 you will be sitting next to the bed with your back to the child, day 11 to 16 you will be sitting with your back to the child but at the foot of the bed until, eventually, you are at the door.

for the players

If you have a child who just plays in her room then step back and allow her to do this. Ensure the room is safe. You may need

to put kiddy locks on the drawers to avoid her using the drawers as steps or emptying all the clothes out.

If she wants to play then she does so with the lights out and eventually she will fall asleep. Some children fall asleep behind their doors — if they normally do this then place a small mattress there so they are comfortable and you don't have to worry about them. They will eventually learn to stay in their beds. Once they are in a deep sleep then you can move them into their beds. However if this wakes them leave them where they are and just put a blanket over them.

for the negotiators

You may have a child who, once she goes to bed, can't go to sleep because she needs a drink or more food or an extra cuddle or to go to the toilet... For all of their demands, except the need to go to the toilet, I ask before she gets into bed and remind her that once she is in bed, "That's it."

So when she starts to ask, you can remind her that you had made it very clear before going to bed that there would be no giving in to her demands.

If she says she needs to go to the toilet, then it's treated in a business-like fashion — up out of bed, into the bathroom (no detours to the kitchen or sitting room) and straight back to bed. Also, keep the talking to as little as possible so she's not getting lots of attention.

Whichever plan you decide to use with your toddler results certainly won't happen overnight. Consistency, clear instructions and not giving too much verbal attention over a period of time, however, will definitely help you to get to your goal of a battle-free bedtime. ●

**Dorothy Waide is a baby whisperer and OHbaby!'s sleep expert. She spends many evenings in the homes of her clients helping them settle their babies, which means her own bedtime routine lasts all of two minutes before she's off to the land of nod. Visit Dorothy at babywithin.co.nz.**

“Once you have put her in bed have a special “sign-off”. This small detail makes the child feel that she has a special time with Mummy and Daddy before going to bed and it acts as a final signal that it's time to go to sleep.”

