

Off To A Great Start:

“Good Night, Sleep Tight”

Creating an Evening Routine for the New School Year

Ask any teacher or pediatrician. They will tell you that many children these days are simply not getting enough sleep. The pace of family life has become busy and hectic; children’s bedtimes are pushed back to accommodate many activities and multiple schedules. The results of this sleep gap show up daily in the classroom both through students’ behavior and their ability to attend to school work.

The beginning of a new school year is often an opportune time to evaluate your evening routine making adjustments where needed to help your child get to sleep at the time that is just right for his or her body’s needs. By carefully observing your child’s behavior with varying amounts of sleep and also by watching when children wake up on their own, a parent can detect which amount of sleep works best in the total number of hours per day, including naps for younger children.

When students arrive at school rested and prepared for the day, well-planned activities the previous afternoon and evening have contributed to a successful morning. Children sleep better at night if they have had nutritious food, adequate attention from parents, and sufficient exercise. However, the exercise should end at least an hour or two before bedtime so that children are not too over stimulated. Allowing screen time of any type (computers, TV, electronic games and DVD’s, etc.) prior to bedtime may keep many children awake longer as does the popular activity of rough housing. Instead, building in a quiet time before bed with calm activities is essential to help most children settle down enough to relax before falling asleep. Children vary considerably in how easily stimulated they are as well as the amount of time it takes their bodies to unwind enough to go to sleep. So, account for these factors in establishing the actual time to be in bed.

Creating an evening routine is an important step in making sure your child is prepared for a successful school day. A routine eases some of the most challenging parts of the day which for many families are the beginning and ending of the day. Children thrive on the predictability of routines. A daily rhythm helps children anticipate and know what to expect next. While being flexible, routines help families accomplish the evening tasks generally in the same way and with the same order. Routines can save families time, build helpful habits and decrease the need to remind, nag, argue or negotiate. When a routine has been established and is working well, parents and children both can go on “automatic pilot”.

Use some detective work to analyze which factors might contribute to a smoother evening routine and an earlier bed time if need be. You are the expert on your family. Many families find that they need to eat dinner earlier or have children start regular evening tasks before dinner. Some parents postpone adult responsibilities like long phone calls until after the children’s bedtime. Often it is helpful to bunch the evening tasks together completing them early in the evening before the child becomes too fatigued. Including a favorite activity to look forward to after the tasks are finished can be helpful. Phrasing this enjoyable activity with positive language stimulates more cooperation. For example, “After you take a



bath, put on pajamas and brush your teeth, we can play a quiet game for twenty minutes before bedtime". Rather than, "If you don't hurry up, we can't play a game tonight".

Sometimes families find that more supervision as well as more encouragement are needed while a younger child is preparing for bed; this keeps the child on task and creates a pleasant atmosphere. However, your goal is to gradually, step-by step, help the child become more self-reliant. A visual chart of evening tasks with pictures or words is a helpful tool to encourage independence when possible. Parents can say, "Go check your chart and see what is next."

Another tip is to give children a warning before they need to stop playing. Children live in the world of play and in the present moment while parents are more future and task oriented. Giving children a transition warning before play needs to stop helps them prepare themselves to cooperate with adult requests. For example, "In five minutes it's time to pick out stories to read in bed..... (later)One more roll of the dice for each of us and then the game will be over tonight. We can play again tomorrow night after bath."

Finally, when a child is in bed, it is a perfect opportunity to build in talk time about the hardest and best times of the day. When the day is over, issues begin to surface for children. Having a preplanned regular time to connect will strengthen your relationship and help you know more about your child's day.

Many other tools are available to help your child settle down for the night. A few examples are telling a story, reading books, giving back rubs, singing softly, listening to quiet music, or playing relaxation and guided imagery CD's for children. Another pleasant way to end your child's day is by giving your child "a self-esteem bath". This is when you describe three specific, honest, positive observations you noticed and appreciated about the child that day: the way he *looked* (gave a big smile coming home from school), how she *behaved* (helped her brother with a puzzle), or what was *said* (remembering to say "Thank You "to a neighbor).

Schools are starting all around the Triangle. Many children are still on summer sleep patterns staying up later and getting up later. Often parents remark that they wish their children had an earlier bedtime than the one currently in place.

Children starting Kindergarten are particularly worn out by the new school routine and expectations even if they have been in full time day care before. Parents are often dismayed by the sudden appearance of afternoon and evening meltdowns. Many parents find it necessary to provide a calming activity in the afternoon or to move a kindergartener's bedtime to 7:30 PM or even earlier.

So, evaluate your family's evening routine and see if there is a need to adjust your child's "inner clock" by backing up the bedtime ten minutes or so every few days. Make sure your child gets plenty of exercise while adjusting to a new bedtime in order to help him feel tired at night. Being sensitive to your child's evening routine helps your family start the school year off on the right foot. You, too, may enjoy some relaxing adult time when your child goes to bed earlier!

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