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Getting Your Baby to Sleep

Dear Parents,

Practicing medicine over the last decade, I have noticed certain patterns in the behavior of some parents. Reflecting back on the beginning of my career as a physician in a “Chassidish” neighborhood - Kiryas Yoel, Monroe, I rarely heard parents report or complain that their children had a hard time staying in their own beds. However, over shabbos lunch with our neighbors in Monsey, I learned that clearly, some parents desperately need guidance when it comes to the “bedtime routine”. My wife and I were almost brought to tears when we heard our hostess challenging and tiring life. The firstborn boy, then three and a half year old, was routinely sleeping in his parents’ bed. This issue seemed to overwhelm her, and put an understandable fear of raising and coping with future siblings in the family.

After starting my practice six years ago in Cedarhurst, I quickly realized that the problem is prevalent here as well. It seems that for some first time parents, a bedtime routine is a very challenging. For this reason, I have incorporated specific questions about sleeping habits into the routine physical exams. I try to discuss and educate parents about the danger of bed-sharing with their infants (it is believed that this is a cause of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, dating back to the story of the two mothers fighting over their infant in front of King Solomon).

The following is some useful information I would like to share with you from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

What's the best way to get my child to go to sleep?

Babies do not have regular sleep cycles until about 6 months of age. While newborns sleep about 16 to 17 hours per day, they may only sleep 1 or 2 hours at a time. As babies get older, they need less sleep. However, different babies have different sleep needs. It is normal for a 6-month-old to wake up during the night but go back to sleep after a few minutes.

Here are some suggestions that may help your baby (and you) sleep better at night.

1. **Keep your baby calm and quiet** when you feed or change her during the night. Try not to stimulate or wake her too much.
2. **Make daytime playtime.** Talking and playing with your baby during the day will help lengthen her awake times. This will help her sleep for longer periods during the night.
3. **Put your baby to bed when drowsy** but still awake. This will help your baby learn to fall asleep on her own in her own bed. Holding or rocking her until she is



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completely asleep may make it hard for her to go back to sleep if she wakes up during the night.

4. **Wait a few minutes before responding** to your child's fussing. See if she can fall back to sleep on her own. If she continues to cry, check on her, but don't turn on the light, play with her, or pick her up. If she gets frantic or is unable to settle herself, consider what else might be bothering her. She may be hungry, wet or soiled, feverish, or otherwise not feeling well.

Toddlers and preschoolers often resist going to sleep, especially if they have older siblings who are still awake. Use the following tips to help your toddler develop good sleep habits:

1. **Set up a quiet routine** before bedtime to help your child understand that it will soon be time to go to sleep. Use this time to read him a story, listen to quiet music, or give him a bath. It may be tempting to play with your child before bed. However, active play may make your child too excited to sleep.
2. **Be consistent.** Make bedtime the same time *every night*. This helps your child know what to expect and helps him establish healthy sleep patterns.
3. **Allow your child to take a favorite thing to bed** each night. It's okay to let your child sleep with a teddy bear, special blanket, or some other favorite toy. These often help children fall asleep—especially if they wake up during the night. Make sure the object is safe. Look for ribbons, buttons, or other parts that may be choking hazards. Stuffing or pellets inside stuffed toys can also be dangerous.
4. **Make sure your child is comfortable.** He may like to have a drink of water, a light left on, or the door left slightly open. Try to handle your child's needs before bedtime so that he doesn't use them to avoid going to sleep.
5. **Do not let your child sleep in the same bed with you.** This can make it harder for him to fall asleep when he is alone.
6. **Do not return to your child's room every time** he complains or calls out. Instead, try the following:
 - Wait several seconds before answering and make your response time longer each time he calls. This will give him a chance to fall asleep on his own.
 - Reassure your child that you are there. If you need to go into the room, do not turn on the light, play with him, or stay too long.
 - Move farther from your child's bed every time you go in, until you can reassure him verbally without entering his room.
 - Remind him each time he calls that it's time to go to sleep.
7. **Give it time.** Helping your child develop good sleep habits can be a challenge and it is normal to get upset when a child keeps you awake at night. Try to be understanding. A negative response by a parent can sometimes make a sleep problem worse.



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Once you have accomplished an effective bedtime routine, your quality of life will surely dramatically improve. In addition, your child will get used to an early bedtime and will perform better socially and academically. Most importantly, you will have the time to re-energize yourself and be an even better parent on the following day.

Wishing you and your babies lots of sweet dreams,

Sincerely,

David Elazar Simai M.D.