

# BEDTIME RESISTANCE

---

## DEFINITION

- These children are over 2 years old and refuse to go to bed or stay in the bedroom.
- These children can come out of the bedroom because they no longer sleep in a crib.
- In the usual form, the child goes to sleep while watching television with the parent or sleeps in the parents' bedroom.
- In a milder form, the child stays in his bedroom but prolongs the bedtime interaction with ongoing question, unreasonable requests, protests, crying, or temper tantrums.
- In the morning, these children sleep late or have to be awakened.

## CAUSE

These are attempts to test the limits, not fear. Your child has found a good way to postpone bedtime and receive extra entertainment. Your child is stalling and taking advantage of your good nature. If given a choice, over 90% of children would stay up until their parents' bedtime. These children also often try to share the parents' bed during the middle of the night. By contrast, the child who comes to the parents' bed if he is frightened or not feeling well should be supported at these times.

## DEALING WITH BEDTIME RESISTANCE

These recommendations apply to children who are manipulative at bedtime, not fearful.

1. **Start the night with a pleasant bedtime ritual.** Provide a bedtime routine that is pleasant and predictable. Most prebedtime rituals last about 30 minutes and include taking a bath, brushing teeth, reading stories, talking about the day, saying prayers, and other interactions that relax your child. Try to keep the same sequence each night because familiarity is comforting for children. Try to have both parents take turns in creating this special experience. Never cancel this ritual because misbehavior earlier in the day. Before you give your last hug and kiss and leave your child's bedroom, ask, "Do you need anything else?"
2. **Establish a rule that your child can't leave the bedroom at night.** Enforce the rule that once the bedtime ritual is over and your child is placed in the bedroom, he

cannot leave that room. Your child needs to learn to put himself to sleep for naps and at bedtime in his own bed. Do not say in the room until he lies down or falls asleep.

Establish a set bedtime and stick to it. Make it clear that your child is not allowed to leave the bedroom between 8:00 at night and 7:00 in the morning (or whatever sleep time you decide one). Obviously, this change won't be accomplished without some crying or screaming for a few nights. If your child has been sleeping with you, tell him "Starting tonight, we sleep in separate beds. You have your room, we have our room. You have your bed, we have our bed. You are too old to sleep with us anymore."

3. **Ignore verbal requests.** For ongoing questions or demands from the bedroom, ignore them and do not engage in any conversation with your child. All of these requests should have been dealt with during your prebedtime ritual. Don't return or talk with your child unless you think he is sick. **SOME EXCEPTIONS:** if your child says he needs to use the toilet, tell him to take care of it himself. If your child says his covers have fallen off and he is cold, promise him you will cover him up after he goes to sleep. You will usually find him well covered.

4. **Close the bedroom door for screaming.** For screaming from the bedroom, tell your child, "I'm sorry I have to close your door. I'll open it as soon as you're quiet." If he pounds on the door, you can open it after 1 or 2 minutes and suggest that he go back to bed. If he does, you can leave the door open. If he doesn't, close the door again. For continued screaming or pounding on the door, reopen approximately every 15 minutes, telling your child that if he quiets down, the door can stay open. Never spend more than 30 seconds reassuring him.

5. **Close the bedroom door for coming out.** If your child comes out of the bedroom, return him immediately to his bed. During this process, avoid any lectures and skip the hug and kiss. Get good eye contact and remind him again that he cannot leave his bedroom during the night. Warn him that if he comes out again, you're sorry but you will need to close the door. Tell him, "I'll be happy to open your door as soon as you're in your bed." If your child says he's in his bed, open the door. If he says nothing, every 10-15 minutes, open the door

just enough to ask your child if he's in his bed now.

**6. Barricade or lock the bedroom door for repeated coming out.** If your child is very determined and continues to come out of the bedroom, consider putting a barricade in front of his door, such as a strong gate. A half-door or plywood plank may also serve this purpose. If your child makes a ruckus at night, you can go to him without taking him out of bedroom and say, "Everyone is sleeping, I'll see you in the morning." If your child learns to climb over the barricade, a full door may need to be kept closed until morning with a hook, piece of rope, or chain lock. While you may consider this step extreme, it can be critical for protecting children less than 5 years old who wander through the house at night without an understanding of dangers (such as the stove, hot water, electricity, knives and going outdoors.)

If your child does not get into trouble at night, you can open the door as soon as he falls asleep. Reassure him that you will do this. Also, each night give him a fresh change to stay in the bedroom with the door open. (CAUTION: If your child has bedtime fears, don't close the door. Get him some counseling.)

**7. Return him if he comes into your bed at night.** For middle-of-the-night attempts to crawl into your bed, unless your child is fearful, sternly order your child back to his own bed. If he doesn't move, escort him back immediately without any physical contact or pleasant conversation. If you are asleep when your child crawls into your bed, return him as soon as you discover his presence. If he attempts to come out again, temporarily close his door. If you are a deep sleeper, consider using some signaling device that will awaken you if your child enters your bedroom (such as a chair placed against your door or a loud bell attached to your doorknob). Some parents simply lock their bedroom door. Remind your child that it is not polite to interrupt other people's sleep. Tell him that if he awakens at night and can't go back to sleep, he can read or play quietly in his room, but he not to bother his parents.

**8. Help the roommate.** If the bedtime screaming wakes up a roommate, have the well-behaved sibling sleep in a separate room until the nighttime behavior has improved. Tell your child with the sleep problem that his roommate cannot return until he stays in his room quietly for three consecutive nights. If you have a small

home, have the sibling sleep in your room temporarily and this will be an added incentive for your other child to improve.

**9. Praise appropriate sleeping behavior.** Praise your child in the morning if he stayed in his bedroom all night. Tell him that people are happier when they get a good night's sleep. If he fought bedtime and fell asleep late, wake him up at the regular time so he will be tired earlier the next evening.

**10. Start bedtime later if you want to minimize bedtime crying.** The later the bedtime, the more tired your child will be and the less resistance he will offer. For most children, you can pick the bedtime hour. For children who are very stubborn and cry a lot, you may want to start the bedtime at 10pm (or whenever your child naturally falls asleep). If the bedtime is at 10pm, start the bedtime ritual at 9:30pm. After your child learns to fall asleep without fussing at 10pm, move the bedtime back 15 minutes every week. In children who can't tell time, you can gradually (over 8 weeks or so) achieve an 8pm bedtime in this way with many fewer tantrums (this technique was described by Adams and Rickert in 1989). However don't let your child sleep late in the morning or you won't be able to advance the bedtime.

### CALL OUR OFFICE

During regular hours if

- Your child is not sleeping well after trying this program for 2 weeks.
- Your child needs to be locked in the bedroom for more than 7 nights.
- Your child is frightened at bedtime (he probably needs some counseling).
- Your child has lots of nightmares.
- Your child also has several discipline problems during the day.
- You have other questions or concerns.