

## Now I lay me Down to Sleep...



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I can remember back when I was little how going to bed seemed like the world's biggest injustice. It always seemed that as soon as the "Dukes of Hazard" would come on, it was bedtime for me.

Now that I am older and understand the science of sleep, I have tremendous sympathy for any parent who, nightly, has to put their child to bed.

Please go to sleep, please

Despite their best efforts, many parents have difficulties putting their children to bed and getting them to sleep. Is it the child being difficult or is it less-than-optimal sleep management practices by the parents? Studies now show that the quality of a child's sleep is affected by parent sleep practices and also by the environment in the household.

Children's sleep problems

A study was conducted in the Department of Psychology at Indiana University on children's sleep disorders. The researchers studied the sleep patterns of 202 children aged 4 to 5 years old through daily sleep logs kept by mothers. The researchers also measured family stress and parenting practices through detailed, multifaceted interviews and incidental observations of parent-child interactions. Children's daytime behavior was measured through preschool teacher reports.

The researchers observed that the children had disrupted sleep patterns, where there was variability in the amount of nightly sleep and variability in the lateness of bedtime. Teachers reported less than optimal adjustment in preschool. Also, the researchers observed a connection between family stress and poor sleep in the children.

Sleep tips

Here are a few sleep tips to help your child get the rest they need:

- Learn Healthy habits now. It is important that your child learn healthy sleep habits as early as possible so they do not develop a sleeping disorder as adults. It is easier to learn new habits than to correct bad ones. The sooner they can learn to sleep well, the healthier they (and you) will be.
- Set their internal clock. Human bodies follow an internal "biological clock", also known as circadian rhythm. Sunlight sets the pace of the circadian rhythm. The brain governs it and since genetics play a role, each one of us has an individual circadian rhythm. As such, it may take time for this timing system to express itself correctly in your child. You may try to help it along by using light to stimulate a normal sleep cycle. In the evening, keep the room dark to signal the brain that it is time to sleep. During the day, keep the room bright to signal that it's time to be awake.
- Maintain regular bedtimes and wake times. Regular sleeping habits are an anchor for healthy sleep. Try to maintain regular waking times, napping times and bed times. It is hard to maintain regular schedules with work, daycare, visiting relatives and some fraction of a social life. An infant who is kept awake exhausts its nervous energy very quickly and becomes peevish and restless. When it is time to put your child to bed, he or she may be too weary to settle down.
- Keep your family environment stress-free. As mentioned above, children are sensitive to stresses in the home. Discuss these stresses with your partner, older child or other family member. In some cases, you may want to consider counseling.
- Be patient. It takes time to learn how to crawl, walk, talk and read. It will also take time for your child to learn healthy sleep habits.