

Question: My three-year-old has recently become afraid of bedtime. What can I do to help him fall asleep?

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children awaken from sleep at times during the night, but can return to sleep quickly and peacefully without help from adults. Changes—such as illness, the birth of siblings, and visits from friends and relatives—can temporarily affect already established sleep habits.

Children may require reassurance that they are protected from whatever dangers stir their imaginations and affect their sleep.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Create a calm and consistent nightly routine.

Transitions can, by nature, be stressful for preschoolers, and bedtime is a transition from the day's activities to quieting down and getting ready for sleep. When children are tired, they can also become even more active.

When you create a series of steps leading up to bedtime, like a bath, songs, stories and saying what you are thankful for, your child learns what to expect and find comfort in the traditions. He is learning that these routines signal it's almost time for bed.

You might also:

- Have your child sleep with a nightlight or special blanket or toy;
- Use deep breathing, massage and relaxation exercises with your child right before sleep; and
- Tell stories or sing with your child before bed. These activities help your child focus on something else and begin to quiet down.

Megan Gunner of the University of Minnesota set up scenarios to study how children cope with stress. Some children were able to control a noisy toy, turning it on and off, while other children had no control over the toy's sound and motion. Gunner notes, "[T]he children's control over making things happen was important in helping them decide whether they liked it or whether it was scary."

Children can also make suggestions about what would help them get ready for sleep.

2

Engage your child in problem solving.

You may need to provide additional support for your child to learn how to manage and master the stress at bedtime. The best place to start is by talking with your child.

- Share your observation with your child that bedtime seems to be difficult for him.
- Ask your child if he has any ideas about what might make it easier.
- Listen to your child's suggestions and set up plans to try them out.

By coming up with ideas to manage stress, your child feels a sense of control. He is practicing finding solutions, which is an important part of Taking on Challenges.

Children may suggest ideas that you never thought of and would be fun to try out. One boy, for example, made a sword from aluminum foil and that helped him feel safe at night. A girl wanted a pet fish in her room to keep her company. Some children's suggestions might not work. If that happens, ask your son to keep brainstorming until you or he come up with an idea that works for both of you.

3

Show your support.

Your child is much more likely to take on everyday challenges if he or she feels supported and cared for by the important adults in his life. At bedtime, you can:

- Reassure your child that he is safe at night. You can say things like, "I know you feel scared at bedtime, but I will keep you safe.";
- Do occasional quick "checks" on your resting child;
- Stay in your child's bedroom for gradually shorter and shorter time periods while your child falls asleep; and
- Recognize and celebrate your child's efforts, both big and small. Tell him things like, "You tried so hard to stay in your bed. I knew you could do it!" or "You remembered to use your nightlight! That helped you."

When you encourage your child to manage and master his own stress, you are giving your child a skill for life.