

The Power of the Bedtime Ritual

One night while in a lackadaisical mood, I actually tried putting my kids to bed by just telling them to, "Go to sleep." That totally backfired. It reminded me of the Power of the Bedtime Ritual.

In general, rituals are a powerful tool that can help mark a transition point, help us bring meaning to an event, and even help sports athletes feel more confident going into a game. Bedtime rituals are no exception. Here we can see that having a bedtime ritual helps little ones transition to bed, consolidate sleep, promote security, and develop healthy sleep habits for their lifetime.

There are numerous studies that support these statements. Establishing a healthy bedtime routine can help teach a child healthy sleep hygiene for when they grow up.ⁱ Researchers report that children (ages 3+) without a consistent bedtime routine obtained less overall sleep.ⁱⁱ Conversely, a different study indicates that having a regular nightly bedtime routine improves sleep in young children, and the younger the child is when you develop a bedtime routine, combined with consistently implementing the routine, the better the outcome.ⁱⁱⁱ A different study demonstrates that "continuous engagement in everyday routines [including bedtime rituals] plays an important role in children's sleep acquisition."^{iv} One group of researchers denotes that, "language based bedtime routines [meaning readings books, singing songs, or story telling] may have lasting positive benefits for children's sleep duration and cognitive development."^v One last study, of many, that I want to mention suggests that having a "consistent nightly bedtime routine is beneficial in improving multiple aspects of infant and toddler sleep, especially wakefulness after sleep onset and sleep continuity, AS WELL AS IMPROVED MATERNAL MOOD."^{vi} Isn't that great news?!

Based on this brief review of some of the findings, we can see that the bedtime routine/ritual is important. Here are some tips to consider when developing this ritual.

- 1) It is never too late to develop a bedtime ritual and bedtime rituals can happen whether you are co-sleeping, room sharing, or having the child sleep independent.
- 2) Start the bedtime ritual 30 minutes to 1 hour before bedtime.
- 3) Think of around 4 to 6 things you want to incorporate into your ritual. Some suggestions are: bath, massage, saying prayers, reading a book, saying goodnight to the world, singing a song. Do these four to six things every night, and do them in the same order.
- 4) Wherever your sleep location is, once you enter that location, you and the baby stay there. There is not a lot of coming and going.
- 5) Dim the lights in the room, start talking softly, and keep big, exciting play to a minimum.
- 6) Keep screens, such as TV's, iPads, and smart phones out of the room. The light from these screens can wake up the child's brain (adults too).
- 7) Be emotionally available for your child. The more we are there just for them, giving them love, snuggles, and making this a special time, the more we promote feelings of security and, as a result, better-regulated sleep for your child.^{vii}

If you have any questions or need assistance with developing a bedtime ritual, please don't hesitate to reach out.

ⁱ Mindell, Jodi A., Lisa J. Meltzer, Mary A. Carskadon, and Ronald D. Chervin. "Developmental aspects of sleep hygiene: findings from the 2004 National Sleep Foundation Sleep in America Poll." *Sleep medicine* 10, no. 7 (2009): 771-779.

ⁱⁱ Mindell, Jodi A., Lisa J. Meltzer, Mary A. Carskadon, and Ronald D. Chervin. "Developmental aspects of sleep hygiene: findings from the 2004 National Sleep Foundation Sleep in America Poll." *Sleep medicine* 10, no. 7 (2009): 771-779.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mindell, Jodi A., Albert M. Li, Avi Sadeh, Robert Kwon, and D. Y. Goh. "Bedtime routines for young children: a dose-dependent association with sleep outcomes." *Sleep* 38, no. 5 (2015): 717-722.

^{iv} Koulouglioti, Christina, Robert Cole, Marian Moskow, Brenda McQuillan, Margaret-Ann Carno, and Annette Grape. "The longitudinal association of young children's everyday routines to sleep duration." *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 28, no. 1 (2014): 80-87.

^v Hale, Lauren, Lawrence M. Berger, Monique K. LeBourgeois, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. "A longitudinal study of preschoolers' language-based bedtime routines, sleep duration, and well-being." *Journal of Family Psychology* 25, no. 3 (2011): 423.

^{vi} Mindell, Jodi A., Lorena S. Telofski, Benjamin Wiegand, and Ellen S. Kurtz. "A nightly bedtime routine: impact on sleep in young children and maternal mood." *Sleep* 32, no. 5 (2009): 599-606.

^{vii} Teti, Douglas M., Bo-Ram Kim, Gail Mayer, and Molly Counterline. "Maternal emotional availability at bedtime predicts infant sleep quality." *Journal of Family Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2010): 307.