Bedtime for Toddlers

As toddlers grow more active and independent, bedtime may become a challenge. Toddlers’ sleep patterns often change and suddenly they try new strategies to avoid bedtime! Establishing a consistent routine and expectations for bedtime is a must for parents at this most challenging time. Here are some suggestions:

- Prepare your child for the transition to bed. Let her know a few minutes before that bedtime is coming. This gives her time to finish playing and get used to the idea of bedtime.
- Get your child a “lovey,” a comforting object like a stuffed animal or a blanket can help (for children older than 1 year).
- Help your toddler feel sleepy. Use low light, low voices, soothing music, a bath, cuddles, or a story in your bedtime routine to help your child relax and feel sleepy.
- Use a night-light for comfort. Darkness can be scary for toddlers.
- Don’t use the bedroom as punishment. Toddlers may begin to think their room is a bad place if they are sent there as a discipline strategy.
- Make sure daytime naps aren’t interfering with nighttime sleep. Some children need their afternoon naps shortened or eliminated around 2–3 years old.

- Eliminate screen usage (computer, phone, and TV) in the hour or two leading up to bedtime.
- Develop a bedtime routine that you can stick with every night—like bath time, lotion, diaper, pajamas, story, and bed. If you do the same thing every night, your child will come to expect this and know what happens next.
Help! All of a sudden my toddler is afraid of the dark.

Fear of the dark is quite common. In order to understand why this is happening now and what you can do, consider where your child is developmentally. By 2 years old, most children are very engaged in the world of pretend and imagination, and they don’t fully understand the difference between fantasy and reality. In their minds, anything can happen at night: The dragon from the bedtime story or the clown from the party could suddenly appear out of the shadows to scare them.

Next, think about any recent changes in your child’s world such as a separation from a loved one, a new baby, a new babysitter, or a recent move. Even what seem like minor changes can make a child feel insecure and fearful.

Also, your child’s temperament is important. Children who are by nature more nervous and cautious, or, who get overstimulated easily, are more likely to develop fears. To help your child overcome nighttime fears:

• Don’t tease him about the fear (even in good humor), or try to talk him out of it. This can prolong the fear as well as erode his trust in you.
• Try to control any anger or frustration you might feel. This can increase her distress. It also makes it harder for you to respond sensitively.
• Make one of his special stuffed animals his “protector” and include it in his bedtime routine. During the day, act out stories in which the protector watches over others.
• Let her sleep with a night-light or leave the hallway light on with her bedroom door open a crack. Using a dimmer may also help. Let your child decide when she’s ready to darken her bedroom.
• If he normally sleeps in his own room and wakes up in the middle of the night, resist the temptation to bring him into your room. This sends the message that he is not safe alone in his room. Instead, go to him to reassure him that the monsters aren’t real.

Most children outgrow these fears in a few weeks or months. Your best strategy for now is to be sensitive and patient and know that this, too, shall pass.

If your toddler’s sleep issues are becoming a problem, talk to your HealthySteps Team about a plan to help.