

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

Sleep Tips





Friends,

Regaining a feeling of safety takes time. Kids in foster care have experienced harm at the hands of their primary caregivers, and it's going to take awhile for them to fully trust you and to feel safe in your home.

For our kids, nighttime might have been particularly scary. Our kids' hard stories might include: sexual abuse at night, hearing their parents' aggression towards each other at night, being left alone in the house at night, or seeing frequent visitors to their home at night for drugs or prostitution.

A child who suddenly becomes hyperactive, aggressive, or shows other strange behaviors as you begin your bedtime routine, is likely showing you that this time of day is particularly scary and hard for him. He might not be able to tell you this with words, he will just show you through behaviors.

Likewise, most of our kids did not have a bedtime routine so your desire for them to follow along in your routine is going to take a lot of practice.

So, start with empathy, understanding, and patience. Build extra time into your evening routines to accommodate these challenges. And try these sleep tips to help the child in your home experience felt-safety at night.

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Keep in mind your child's developmental age.

The kids who are placed in our homes are often not emotionally or developmentally their actual age. What this means is that you may be parenting a 9 year old with the sleep needs of a 5 year old, etc. So keep this in mind as you begin to make bedtime routines.

You'll want to ask yourselves. "What is the developmental age of my child? Are my expectations for him realistic?"

For instance, a 7 month old baby living in toxic stress, may have the sleep needs and patterns of a newborn and your expectation for him to sleep through the night will be inappropriate. A 12 year old who is closer to age 7 emotionally, will need more help with the bedtime routine than you might expect.



The challenge: It's hard to look at the body of your 10 year old who has the street smarts of a 25 year old, and still see a 5 year old. But that is exactly what can be going on with your child. His life experiences might have taught him how to manipulate to survive, he might have the mouth of a sailor, but his developmental and emotional needs...that's likely somewhere around half his age if he hasn't experienced a safe healing family yet. So, see beyond his age on paper and lower your expectations. He might be 10 but he might need the bedtime routine of a 5 year old. He might be 2, but need the bedtime routine of an infant.



Use the parent the child feels safest with.

It is normal for a child in foster care to bond and feel safest with one parent at the beginning. Usually, it is the mother in the home but sometimes it is the father. It generally depends on their story—who they were raised by, who harmed them, etc.

Please respect this fear and help the child learn to become comfortable with the other parent slowly over time.

This may mean that one parent needs to take the lead on the bedtime routine (or other areas of the day such as bath time, getting dressed, etc). Then slowly over time include the other parent in elements of the evening routine. Do it together at first; then when the child is ready, have the other parent do parts of the routine alone.

Eventually, the child will grow in their relationship with the parent they were originally fearful of and you'll have more flexibility with who can do the bedtime routine.



The challenge: In order to do this, you may have to make some changes to the patterns in your home and you might not want to. But it is really important we meet our kids where they are at in feeling safe and so for a time you may have to make some sacrifices. However, if you make safety and connection a priority, your child will overcome their fears faster and you can go back to some of the things you prefer quicker.



Give the child safe control over their bedroom.

If the child is older, talk about their bedroom and what they would need in there to feel safe.

Door open? Door shut? Lights on? Nightlight? Stuffed animals? Music on? Sound machine?

Let them choose the sheets and the comforter set. They may have a sensory preference. Let them choose special items to have in bed with them. Let them choose what kind of pajamas they wear as some might make them feel safer than others. Let them move the furniture around to what is most comfortable for them.

If you have children sharing a bedroom, then help them make compromises or take turns on what makes each of them feel safe.

Some of our kids are NOT used to sleeping in a nice clean bed. They are used to sleeping on the sofa or a mattress on the floor. Their request might seem unusual but when it is safe, you'll want to meet them where they are at. Maybe a sleeping bag on the floor next to their bed is their preference for a while, and slowly over time they'll crawl into their bed when they're ready.

Also, communicate that the child's bedroom is a safe space for them. Make sure they know that only they can sit or lay in their bed: no one else. When putting them to sleep at night, pull a chair next to their bed rather than sitting on the bed. This helps the child to feel safe and teaches them good boundaries.



The challenge: You may have your own preference for how a child's room is setup or how they should sleep. But at the beginning, you might have to let go of those preferences in order for the child to feel safe and for everyone in the house to get some sleep. Over time, you may be able to introduce some of your preferences once the child feels safe and connected to you but at the beginning, this is probably not a battle you want to get into.



Make a predictable routine.

In general, children thrive in routines. For a child placed with us through foster care, routines are even more important because they give the child predictability which calms the part of the brain that is operating in fear.

Each family's routine will look different, but the first step is to create one. Choose a bedtime routine start time and end time. Give kids reminders and countdowns as you approach the start of your routine so they're better able to successfully make the transition. Routines should include things like a snack, baths, brushing teeth, putting on pjs, etc.

Does your child need more time to accomplish all his bedtime steps before your end time? Then start the routine earlier in the evening.

For some children, a visual bedtime schedule can be helpful or a list of tasks. Some kids need to "see" what they need to do or "check-off" what they are accomplishing.

If the schedule's going to be different because of a late night out or some kind of other known change, let your children know early on in the day and remind them as you get closer to bedtime. For instance, "Guys, we normally read three books before bed, but tonight we are only going to be able to read one because we are getting home late from the baseball game." Communicating it verbally ahead of time and using reminders will help prepare them to accept the change which will lessen the chance of a meltdown or control battle.



The challenge: Your kids are likely not used to a routine. Most children in foster care did NOT have bedtimes, wake times, help with routines, etc. so your child will need you to do these routines alongside him. After a few weeks of doing it together, you'll likely find them more compliant or able to do some pieces independently.



Include connecting rituals.

Like routines, rituals give children predictability and something to look forward to during the bedtime routine. Rituals build in connection which is also important during bedtime with our kids. Again, every family will look different, but rituals can include:



Playing a card game with older kids



Prayer time



Snuggles



Reading stories together



Listening to music



Exercising



Chatting in bed



The challenge: After a long day, you'll likely want to breeze through these steps or omit them altogether so you can move on, but building in connection through rituals is important for your child to feel safe and valued by you. Skip these steps and you'll likely have a child who keeps getting out of bed to connect with you. Have more than one child in the family? Try doing some of these routines all together, take turns, or divide and conquer if you are a two-parent family.



Give your child appropriate choices.

Some of our kids may rebel against bedtime as a way to exert their control. To combat this, build in choices at certain times of your bedtime routines. Ideas include:

Do you want this or that for your bedtime snack?

Do you want to put your PJs on or brush your teeth next?

Do you want to wear these PJs or those PJs to bed?

Do you want to play a round of Uno or hearts before bed?

Do you want your nightlight on or off?

The best way to use choices is to pick two, both of which you are okay with, and then present the child those two choices. Stick with those choices unless your child presents a third, equally appropriate, choice and does so with respect. Open ended questions don't work with our children and can often leave them making no choice at all which can make us frustrated.



The challenge: If you think your child should just obey what you say, or if you take a “my way or the highway, do what I said” approach to bedtime that does not utilize some element of choices, you will set up a control battle with your child and you cannot win a control battle without using an element of fear (threats, raising voice, punishments) which doesn’t help.



Practice outside of the moment.

One of the ways we can help bedtime go smoother is to practice the routine when it isn't bedtime! I know this might sound a bit silly and your older children might not go for it but especially for developmentally younger children, this can be a very helpful tool.

In the middle of the day, when your child is happy, well-fed, and regulated, announce that you are going to practice the bedtime routine. Go through the motions in your routine as if it were bedtime—all the way through tucking the child in bed, saying goodnight and leaving the room.

This can also be done through play by putting a stuffed animal or barbie doll to bed. You can also pretend that you are the child and they are the parent and they can go through the routine giving you directives on what comes next. This role reversal gives young children control over the situation and can work to calm their own fears.

With older children use walkie talkies or baby monitors to show children that you are able to hear them or see them when they need you. Practice talking to each other in them during the daytime when they are not triggered in fear. Have the child practice being the safe adult and the child. You can then leave the walkie talkie in their bedroom at night so the child feels safe. Sometimes this simple act will be enough and they'll never actually use it.

Practicing the bedtime routine in the middle of the day, laughing and smiling through the funniness of it all, can help to ease them into the actual bedtime routine as they remember practicing it when they weren't fearful.

Doing this over and over again should create felt-safety for your kiddo and result in a more successful bedtime routine as you build new neural pathways of a safe bedtime routine for your kiddo.



The challenge: This intervention requires being proactive and playful—skills that don't come easily for every person. You might also feel like you don't have time for this, but I assure you that you will either invest the time during the day or you'll invest a lot of time at night.



Use calming activities.

Consider the use of calming activities during your bedtime routine for children who seem to need these.



Warm baths



Essential oils



Snuggling



Reading books together



Massages



Doing children's yoga (Check out Cosmic Yoga on youtube!)



The challenge: You can't just tell your child to do these things. They generally won't unless they are older and enjoy these routines for themselves. For younger children or children recently placed in your home, you **MUST** do most of these calming rituals alongside the child.



Use proprioceptive activities.

On the other hand, some of our children don't need calming rituals to get ready for bed. They need some deep pressure/proprioceptive work to get ready for bed.



Playfully wrestling with a parent



Receiving tight hugs



Deep pressure massages



Wall/chair pushes or other exercises



Carrying heavy items around the house (a great time to take out the trash!)



Wearing weighted clothing items or laying under a weighted blanket



Going for a run

Some children may have sensory needs that contribute to their inability to fall or stay asleep (like proprioceptive needs mentioned above). If you suspect this might be the case, consider contacting early intervention or your school district to get an evaluation done by an occupational therapist. Please be aware that these evaluations can take awhile to complete so consider doing some research about sensory items that might help in the meantime such as weighted blankets, stuffed animals and compression sheets for bed.



The challenge: Again, children aren't going to naturally know that their body needs these things. You're going to have to do the activities alongside them at first and then teach the child to recognize how it makes them feel more prepared for sleep.



Include food and hydration in your routine.

Our children need to eat and drink water every two hours to keep their brains in optimal learning mode. So, if you had dinner a couple hours ago, you'll want to add a bedtime snack to your routine (consider high protein options).

For children who struggle with a food insecurity (fear they won't get fed, fear there won't be enough, etc), consider putting a granola bar or a small basket of snacks each night on a table next to their bed. Tell them they are welcome to eat these snacks if they need to during the night.

Often times, just knowing the food is there within reach can calm a child and enable them to fall asleep. Usually, this intervention is needed for a small period of time before the child realizes that food will always be available to them and you can discontinue the intervention. For some kids who were deeply deprived of food, this may need to continue longer. Likewise, a water bottle next to their bed is a good idea too.



The challenge: Food in my child's room? No way, there will be bugs or wrappers all over the place! Ok, I hear you. So, include food items that are wrapped that won't attract bugs as easily, include a small trashcan next to the bed, and have your child bring it downstairs to empty every morning. This may be an unusual idea, but it works, so give it a try.



Recognize the fear responses that night time can bring.

For a lot of our children, night time was a time when lots of scary things would happen. Your child may be SCARED when you tell him it's bedtime and revert to controlling, manipulative, and negative behaviors to delay the inevitable time for sleep. What he needs from you then is not a heavy hand, but empathy and understanding. Walk with him through the routine, present him choices, stay with him until he falls asleep.

For some kids, this season is short, for some kids it is longer. But please see the behaviors not as the willful disobedience of a child who doesn't want to go to bed but of a child who is on alert and scared. Trauma is encoded in memories so even if he can't tell you why he is scared, his body likely remembers why.

Provide felt-safety into the routine through the use of choices.

- Rock the child each evening with a cup of milk like you do with a newborn.
- Fill the child's bed with blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals so they can feel comforted by the items.
- Sit by the bed and hold his hand. Lay on the floor and rest until the child falls asleep.
- Make a pallet on the floor of your room for the child to lay on if he wakes scared in the middle of the night.
- For a lot of our children, they aren't used to sleeping in nice warm beds in quiet houses. Our child's home might have been loud at night so our child might benefit from a sound machine turned up loudly. Our child might rather sleep in a sleeping bag on the floor of his room for awhile because that is what he slept on at home.

Meet the child where he is and consider how you can keep him safe but also give him a more comforting environment.

The truth is that the middle of the night might be your best time to learn more about your child's story.

Because every parent deeply desires an uninterrupted night of sleep, we can all be prone to dismissing the child who gets up in the middle of the night needing us. We can easily wave him back to his bedroom and tell him we'll talk about things in the morning. Sometimes, this might be an appropriate response.

But for some of our kids, nighttime is when they remember their traumas and they can be in a particularly vulnerable place to share these stories with a trusting adult.

If you believe that your child suffered deeply at night, consider responding differently when they wake you up. As sleepy as you will be (and you will be!), the middle of the night may be the time your child actually reveals hard things to you about their past that you were not aware of. Being able to share them with you at 2am might actually be the first step to healing their nighttime fears! Then you'll be able to talk more about it the next day and make a plan for how they can feel safer tomorrow night.



The challenge: if your child has an extreme fear response to bedtime, you're going to have to change your evening plans. It is not okay to force a scared child to be isolated in his bedroom in the dark. You must meet his needs for a safe and protective parent to be on guard for him. He likely never had this and instead, had parental figures who did the harm themselves. This means Netflix might have to wait till the next day. You might have to take turns if you are a two-parent family. You may have to schedule your own self-care for some time the next day. If you don't invest in meeting this fear need for your child, you will just prolong it and suffer through many more sleepless nights in the future. You are also likely to see worse behaviors during the day since the child is not able to regulate this fear at night.

Quick Tips

1. Make sure the child feels safe with the caregiver doing the bedtime routine.
2. Give the child safe control over how their bedroom is set up.
3. Stick to a predictable bedtime routine.
4. Communicate ahead of time any changes there will be to the routine.
5. Practice the routine when it isn't bedtime.
6. Give the child a bedtime snack.
7. Build in choices for the child to make during the routine.
8. Build in connection and rituals to the bedtime routine.
9. Use a visual bedtime schedule to help if needed.
10. Address any sensory needs your child has.
11. Rock the child with a cup of milk before sleep.
12. Use a sound machine or play music in the child's room.
13. Fill the child's bed with blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals to provide felt safety.
14. If child is having a fear response, stay with them till they fall asleep.
15. Put a sleeping bag on the floor of your room if child wakes scared in the middle of the night.
16. Talk to your doctor about sleep aides.



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