

### DEFINITION

- These children are over 2 years old and refuse to go to bed or stay in the bedroom.
- These children can come out of the bedroom many times because they no longer sleep in a crib.
- In the usual form, the child eventually goes to sleep while watching television with the parent or in the parents' bed.
- In a milder form, the child stays in his or her bedroom but prolongs the bedtime interaction with ongoing questions, unreasonable requests, protests, crying, or temper tantrums.
- In the morning, these children sleep late or have to be awakened because they went to bed so late.

### Cause

These are unreasonable attempts to test the limits, not expressions of fear. Your child has found a good way to postpone bedtime and receive extra entertainment. Your child is stalling and taking advantage of your good nature. If given a choice, over 90% of children would stay up until their parents' bedtime. These children also often try to share the parents' bed at bedtime or sneak into their parents' bed during the middle of the night. By contrast, the child who comes to the parents' bed if she is frightened or not feeling well should be supported at these times.

### DEALING WITH BEDTIME RESISTANCE

The following recommendations apply to children who are manipulative at bedtime, not fearful.

1. **Clarify what a good sleeper does.** Tell your child what you want her to do: At bedtime a good sleeper stays in her bed and doesn't scream. During the night, a good sleeper doesn't leave her bedroom or wake up her parents unless it's an emergency. A good sleeper gets a sticker and a special treat for breakfast. A bad sleeper loses a privilege for the following day (e.g., all television shows or access to a favorite toy).
2. **Start the night with a pleasant bedtime ritual.** Provide a bedtime routine that is pleasant and predictable. Most prebedtime rituals last about 30 minutes and include taking a bath, brushing teeth, reading stories, talking about the day, saying prayers, and other interactions that relax your child. Try to keep the same sequence each night because familiarity is comforting for children. Try to have both parents take turns in creating this special experience. Never cancel this ritual because of misbehavior earlier in the day. Before you give your last hug and kiss and leave your child's bedroom, ask, "Do you need anything else?" Then leave and don't return. It's very important that you are *not* with your child at the moment of falling asleep. (Reason: she will then need you to be present following normal awakenings at night.)
3. **Establish a rule that your child can't leave the bedroom at night.** Enforce the rule that once the bedtime ritual is over and your child is placed in the bedroom, she cannot leave that room. Your child needs to learn to put herself to sleep for naps and at bedtime in her own bed. Do not stay in the room until she lies down or falls asleep. Establish a set bedtime and stick to it. Make it clear that your child is not allowed to leave the bedroom between 8:00 at night and 7:00 in the morning (or whatever sleep time you decide on). Obviously, this change won't be accomplished without some crying or screaming for a few nights.  
If your child has been sleeping with you, tell her "Starting tonight, we sleep in separate beds. You have your room, we have our room. You have your bed, we have our bed. You are too old to sleep with us anymore."
4. **Ignore verbal requests.** For ongoing questions or demands from the bedroom, ignore them and do not engage in any conversation with your child. All of these requests should have been dealt with during your prebedtime ritual. Don't return or talk with your child unless you think she is sick. (*Some Exceptions:* If your child says she needs to use the toilet, tell her to take care of it herself. If your child says her covers have fallen off and she is cold, promise her you will cover her up after she goes to sleep. You will usually find her well covered.)
5. **Close the bedroom door for screaming.** For screaming from the bedroom, tell your child, "I'm sorry I have to close your door. I'll open it as soon as you're quiet." If she pounds on the door, you can open it after 1 or 2 minutes and suggest that she go back to bed. If she does, you can leave the door open. If she doesn't, close the door again. For continued screaming or pounding on the door, reopen it approximately every 15 minutes, telling your child that if she quiets down, the door can stay open. Never spend more than 30 seconds reassuring her. Although you may not like to close the door, you don't have many options. Rest assured, if your child is over 2 years old and has no daytime separation fears, it's quite reasonable to do this.
6. **Close the bedroom door for coming out.** If your child comes out of the bedroom, return her immediately to her bed. During this process, avoid any lectures and skip the hug and kiss. Get good eye contact and remind her again that she cannot leave her bedroom during the night. Warn her that if she comes out again, you're sorry but you will need to close the door. If she comes out, close the door. Tell her, "I'll be happy to open your door as soon as you're in your bed." If your child says she's in her bed, open the door. If she screams, every 15 minutes, open the door just enough to ask your child if she's in her bed now.

7. **Lock the bedroom door or put up a barricade for repeated coming out.** If your child is very determined and continues to come out of the bedroom, consider putting a barricade in front of her door, such as a strong gate. A half-door or plywood plank may also serve this purpose. If your child makes a ruckus at night, you can go to her without taking her out of her bedroom and say, "Everyone is sleeping, I'll see you in the morning."

If your child learns to climb over the barricade, a full door may need to be kept closed until morning with a push-button lock, hook and eyelet screw, piece of rope, or chain lock. Although you may consider this step extreme, it can be critical for protecting children less than 5 years old who wander through the house at night without an understanding of dangers (such as the stove, hot water, electricity, knives, and going outdoors).

If your child does not get into trouble at night, you can open the door as soon as she falls asleep. Reassure her that you will do this. Also, each night give her a fresh chance to stay in the bedroom with the door open. (**Caution:** If your child has bedtime fears, don't close her door. Get her some counseling.)

8. **If your child comes into your bed at night, return her to her own bed.** For middle-of-the-night attempts to crawl into your bed, unless your child is fearful, sternly order your child back to her own bed. If she doesn't move, escort her back immediately without any physical contact or pleasant conversation. If you are asleep when your child crawls into your bed, return her as soon as you discover her presence. If she attempts to come out again, lock her door until morning. If you are a deep sleeper, consider using some signaling device that will awaken you if your child enters your bedroom (such as a chair placed against your door or a loud bell attached to your door-knob). For children over age 5, some parents simply lock their bedroom door or put a stop sign poster on the outside of it. Remind your child that it is not polite to interrupt other people's sleep. Tell her that if she awakens at night and can't go back to sleep, she can read or play quietly in her room, but she is not to bother her parents.
9. **If your child awakens you at night with screaming or demands, visit her briefly.** Reassure her that she is safe. If she needs her blankets readjusted, help her do this. Then leave. On the following day teach her how to solve independently any complaints she makes during the night. (Remind your child that it is not polite to awaken

people at night. Tell her that if she awakens at night and can't go back to sleep, she can read or play quietly in her room.)

10. **Help the roommate.** If the bedtime screaming wakes up a roommate, have the well-behaved sibling sleep in a separate room until the nighttime behavior has improved. Tell your child with the sleep problem that her roommate cannot return until she stays in her room quietly for three consecutive nights. If you have a small home, have the sibling sleep in your room temporarily and this will be an added incentive for your other child to improve.
11. **Awaken your child at the regular time each morning.** Even if she fought bedtime and fell asleep late, wake her up at the regular time so she will be tired earlier the next evening.
12. **Start bedtime later if you want to minimize bedtime crying.** The later the bedtime, the more tired your child will be and the less resistance she will offer. For most children, you can pick the bedtime hour. For children who are very stubborn and cry a lot, you may want to start the bedtime at 10 PM (or whenever your child naturally falls asleep). If the bedtime is at 10 PM, start the bedtime ritual at 9:30 PM. After your child learns to fall asleep without fussing at 10 PM, move the bedtime back by 15 minutes every week. In children who can't tell time, you can gradually (over 8 weeks or so) achieve an 8 PM bedtime in this way with many fewer tantrums (this technique was described by Adams and Rickert in 1989). However, don't let your child sleep late in the morning or you won't be able to advance the bedtime.



## CALL OUR OFFICE

### *During regular hours if*

- Your child is not sleeping well after trying this program for 2 weeks.
- Your child needs to be locked in the bedroom for more than 7 nights.
- Your child is frightened at bedtime (she probably needs some counseling).
- Your child has lots of nightmares.
- Your child also has several discipline problems during the day.
- You have other questions or concerns.