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From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

"I am so tired. Ever since our son started attending child care, bedtime has become a disaster. He now takes a long nap every afternoon with his class. It is often past 10:30 at night by the time we manage to get him to go to sleep. Bobby, age three, rarely naps when he is home with us on the weekends. His teacher points out that he is the first one to fall asleep and insists he needs to lie down with the other children each day. My husband and I are desperate for a few minutes of quiet in the evening."

*Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of **Positive Discipline for Preschoolers**, Prima Press, and co-author with Jane Nelsen of **My First Visit to Preschool**, Fisher-Price. She is a 17 year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children of her own.*

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– Solutions –

This is a three-way collision of differing requirements. Each of you has needs to meet. Your child requires rest. His teacher must care for a group of children and provide time for them to recharge. You and your spouse need some quiet time alone each evening. Add to the mix the special situation of children in all-day child care and their logical craving for time with their parents. The prospect of a decent night's sleep for anyone appears to be a mission impossible.

When I was pregnant, I was constantly hungry. I ate frequent small meals and snacks. I slept every chance I got. Young children's bodies have needs very similar to those of pregnant women. They are producing new growth at a phenomenal rate. Even though your child might not nap on weekends, he has good reason for fatigue at school. The typical preschool or child care day is long, busy, and energetic. Children need a rest during the day. Your son is listening to his natural inner clock. His little body is tired by the afternoon rest time.

Consider another possibility. He may just want to extend his time with you in the evenings. Your attention, even when achieved by hassles, battles, and his own sleep loss, appears preferable to sacrificing more time apart from you. Both of these needs are important.

His teacher faces a roomful of tired, drooping (pooping), and probably cranky children each afternoon. She realizes that without some down time their tolerance, energy, and general cooperation disappear. The value of this rest would become more evident to all the parents in the center by its absence. Image arriving at pick-up time to the chaos of a roomful of hysterical, cranky, and overtired children (not to mention the condition of the weary teacher).

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*What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to **From a Parent's Perspective**. Each month, we will address your real life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.*

Working parents put in long days, too. Unfortunately, most bosses do not offer nap times. (What a great solution that would be!) It feels unfair that the main times of each day with your child involve hassles. The day begins with battles over getting ready in the morning. The day ends struggling with bedtime each evening. Most of us long for a chance to discuss the day with our partner, catch up on news events, or simply kick off our shoes and relax. Parents are people, too.

Look for a win-win-win solution. Consider a new evening routine. Since one of the unmet needs is possibly your child wanting time with you, the cure to bedtime hassles is well before bedtime. Perhaps a snuggle, reading a book together, or sitting and coloring with your child might be sufficient time to reconnect for both of you. Switch the focus from getting through the evening tasks — meal preparation, laundry, or house cleaning — to time to be with each other.

Even 15 minutes invested in this way produces a remarkable dividend for the whole family. The house may be messier, but the needs of the people in the house are far more important. Forget the dust on the cabinets (or let's face it, even the crud on the floor, the pile of dirty clothes, and the messages on the answering machine). Childhood vanishes quickly, dirty dishes are everlasting.

Switch the goal away from getting your son to fall asleep early in the evening. Make a new goal. The new goal is to get him into his room by a certain time each evening. After a bedtime story, sharing some of the day's events or other family routines, tuck him in and bid him good night. Then leave the room. He might continue to listen to a tape, look at books, or tell stories to his stuffed animals. He does not need to fall asleep right away. He just needs to be in his room, relatively quiet and ready to go to sleep.

The task of parents is to provide a peaceful, pleasant, and relaxing environment. Actually going to sleep, or not, is the sole responsibility of each child. Just because a child is still awake does not mean his parents need to dance attendance upon him. Once he is in his room and settled for the night, his parents have the evening to themselves. His nap at preschool is no longer an issue.

Everyone gets their needs met. A win-win-win solution. Once the focus switches to family time together and an expectation of quiet time in his room, asleep or not, parents will get the child-free respite they need. Their son will get the attention at home he desires and the mid-day rest at school his tiny body craves. The teachers will be grateful. They will face a relaxed, rested, and energetic little guy after his daily nap.

– Booster Thoughts –

- Take time to be together and reconnect daily.
- Establish a simple, clear, and predictable routine at bedtime. Let the routine be the boss.
- Hand over to your child responsibility for sleeping.