



From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

— Situation —

HELP! I have a two and a half year old son who won't sleep in his own room. I have a hard time getting him to sleep and, to make matters worse, he HAS to sleep in my bed. Any advice on how to ease the transition into his own bed? He is forever getting up. I've tried lying down with him until he goes to sleep. I've tried rocking him to sleep. I finally lose it and start spanking him every time he gets up. We cannot continue on like this. I am VERY DESPERATE!

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— Solution —

It takes perspective, lots of patience, and saint-like persistence to be a parent at bedtime. The time of day when parents feel weary, wiped out, or ready to crawl between their own waiting sheets turns little Jason's midnight wanderings into a waking nightmare. All you want to do is go to sleep and have him do the same — in his own bed. Or is it?

Perspective/Soul Searching

If you feel at all ambiguous about whether you want your child to sleep alone, whether you feel you need to lie with him or cater to him in some other way, then he will sense that uncertainty. What do you really want? Why do you feel guilty? What will work for both of you? Once you are clear about what you want, resolve your own feelings of guilt, and determine what will work best for both of your needs, your son will sense that too.

Patience/Advance Planning

If the mom in the original question decides she really wants her son in his own bed, then she needs to explain that to him during the day. She can tell him how much she loves him, that she realizes she sleeps better when he is not in her bed, and then express her confidence that he will rest best in his own bed.

*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.*

Your Needs

"But I'm so exhausted." Take care of yourself. Take a bath or shower if that helps you unwind.

A single parent or one home alone might bring her child into the shower or bath with her. If you are uncomfortable with doing so and your child is too young to leave unattended while you are in the bath, trade babysitting with a neighbor for an hour every afternoon so you get time to refresh your frazzled spirit. Single parents **must** find a support network; the job of parenting is not a *lone wolf* task.

Sit quietly and relax with a cup of tea after dinner (just ignore the dishes for a moment, look the other way). Your child might enjoy sipping his own cup of herbal tea with you. If not, have a basket of special toys you take down after dinner. He can play nearby while you savor this break in your day. Roll your head, circle your shoulders, and let your muscles relax.

Couples need to spend a few moments connecting with one another, talking over the day or sharing coffee or tea after the meal. (Many of you are choking on laughter at this point. "Who has time for a meal?" you sigh.) Then sip hot soup out of cups, it will do dual duty as a meal and a relaxing potion. This can even be done while the parents sit on the bathroom floor and little Janie splashes in her evening bath.

Some parental needs must move to the back burner. The parent determined to sink into a favorite chair in front of the television with the newspaper runs a higher chance of finding herself issuing threats, battling with a mate, or listening to a wailing child long into the night.

Your Child's Needs

Make sure your child is tired. Go for a walk after dinner, maybe take an evening swim class together, or go to a park for some running and exercise on the climbers. If your child takes a long afternoon nap, he may not be quite ready to fall asleep by 8:00. Active play helps him expend energy and feel more ready to sleep.

Perhaps his behavior is his way of saying he wants more time with you. These activities also meet his need for your time and attention and provide a way for both of you to reconnect.

Bedtime Routines

A bedtime routine works wonders. Children under three enjoy helping mom or dad decorate a simple list of bedtime activities. With an older or more verbal child, ask for suggestions about bedtime problems, listen to your child's feelings and ideas, and then work together to plan a bedtime routine.

Persistence

You calmed yourself, you spent an hour at the park, and you followed the routine, including lots of nice cuddling. Little Jason is all tucked in and you are channel surfing for your favorite program. Pitter, patter, flap, flop, the sound of his plastic pajama feet are unmistakable as he makes a beeline to your side. All is lost. Despair?

No. Definitely not. He is just checking to see if you really meant what you said. What did you say? You said that if he comes out of his bed, you will walk with him (or carry him if necessary) back into his own bed. Now your job is to stick to it.

Do not say anything; just act calmly and firmly. Even if you must repeat this trip a few (or many) times, try to stay calm, consistent, and caring. That is a pretty big order, especially at night when, relaxed or not, you are simply tired.

Perhaps you headed straight to your own bed. If he comes into your room, calmly remove him and walk or carry him back to his bed. Offer him a chance to return on his own.

What if he cries? Decide on what you will do. Some parents find that it only takes a night or two of crying and everyone begins to settle into healthy bedtime routines. That does not make listening to the cries easy.

Other parents choose to return to a crying child and offer a soothing word or comfort him with an additional hug and tuck-in. As long as parents remain clear, consistent, and kind, whichever approach is used, children soon begin falling asleep in their own beds with minimal fuss.

Remember: Preparing a suitable environment for sleep is something the adult can do — actually falling asleep, only the child can do.

Bedtime Rx

Decide what you want, what you both need, and what you are willing to do to achieve it. Prepare your child for bedtime with active play, follow your bedtime routine, give him the full focus of your attention. Take care of yourself, postpone some of your own activities, find support from a partner or other source. When tuck-in time comes around, the parent(s) will feel calm, the child(ren) will be tired, and the expectations will be clear. That's a great Rx for a sound night's sleep — for everyone.