

DAILY ROUTINES AND HABITS

Children are creatures of habit. Undesirable behavior patterns will develop a life of their own if they are unchecked. The following suggestions can help ease children through transitional times with a minimum amount of frustration.

BEDTIME

Use the following actions to help children settle down at night and get needed rest:

- Make sure children are completely ready for bed in advance by withholding favorite activities until baths are taken, pajamas are on, and teeth are brushed.
- Establish a routine of reading or talking with children while they are lying in bed.
- Allow children to keep a light or music on if this helps them stay in bed.
- Children may need to cry it out until they learn to fall asleep in their own beds. Prepare yourself for one to four nights of screaming. You can go to the room every 10 minutes to reassure children that they are not abandoned and calmly say, “Time for sleep.”
- If children leave the room, physically take or return them to bed without any discussion and hold the door closed until they demonstrate that they can stay in bed.
- Do not allow children who stay up late to oversleep. This creates vicious cycles.
- Use rewards in the morning (points, stars, TV with breakfast, bacon for breakfast, or special cereal) to reinforce desirable bedtime behavior until it becomes a habit.
- When the above do not help, therapy may be needed for trauma or obsessive concerns.

Note: When children prolong their bedtime but can get up when they are supposed to and are not tired during the day, their bedtime may be too early.

BED-WETTING

If children had good bladder control and have regressed, they may be reacting to trauma and need therapy. However, a small, immature, bladder often causes bed-wetting. Many children do not grow out of this condition until they are 10 or older. Often, a parent had the same problem as a child.

Medication and “bladder training” can help:

- Withhold liquids two to three hours before bed.
- Have children drink lots of liquid during the day to stretch the bladder and then gradually increase the length of time they must wait until they are allowed to urinate.
- Teach children how to stop and start their stream while urinating to build muscle control.
- Give children a choice of wearing padded pants at night or washing their own sheets until they learn control.

BEDROOM STANDARDS

Should children be required to keep their room clean, or can they be allowed to set their own standards? There is no right or wrong answer, but teenagers who have had their rooms kept clean for them when they were young will not automatically take over the responsibility just because they are older: Most children need training!

- Supervise and help toddlers—“I’ll pick this up and you pick up that.”
- Withhold privileges until school-age children clean their rooms. Do the same for at least a month with teens who have never been taught to keep their rooms neat.

- When teens who have had some training in keeping their rooms clean become resistant, allow them leeway on how they “define” their territory. This will give them an option for “healthy rebellion.”

CURFEW

Although parents can become panic-stricken when a child does not come home on time, it is natural for children to be late now and then. Make sure you have considered the child’s viewpoint before establishing curfews and seek input from other parents or professionals. If problems persist, several courses of action can be taken:

- Assign the writing of essays that show understanding of the need for curfews and plans for keeping them.
- Withhold important privileges (telephone or TV) until curfews are kept.
- Put children on restriction from going out—a day for every 20 minutes late.
- Go after children who violate curfews if you know their whereabouts.
- As a brief punishment, insist on accompanying children when they go out.

HYGIENE

Children vary greatly in the ages at which they become interested in good grooming. Simply train children who have other priorities by withholding privileges until they have taken baths, and brushed hair and teeth. Reassure children that they will not always need reminders. Make sure you are not overly concerned. Remember that some children do not need daily baths.

SNEAKING OUT

Many young teens engage in this behavior. Assess if young people are sneaking out due to an adventurous spirit or if it is a symptom of a more serious problem. The severity of the consequences will depend on the underlying causes.

- Assign essays on the dangers of sneaking out, its effect on others, and plans to change.
- Withhold privileges until there is no evidence of sneaking out for a couple of weeks or until essays are written.
- In extreme cases, use locks or alarms on doors, bar windows, or sleep in front of the child’s door.

SOILING

When children over 4 are under stress or are chronically angry, they can tense their anal sphincter and not eliminate feces properly. Eventually, their bowels may stop sending messages to the brain when elimination is needed and some feces may leak out. A doctor should be consulted to rule out any medical condition. Stool softeners can be prescribed to relieve impacting, and the child can be rewarded for relaxing on the toilet and having clean pants. Relaxation training and helping children express feelings may be needed.

WAKING UP AND GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL

When an alarm clock or one reminder does not help a child get out of bed, find an action that does: use a fine water mist spray, hold a piece of vinegar-soaked cotton under the nose, or send rowdy pets into the room. A special breakfast treat, watching TV with breakfast, or another reward can be used as an incentive if the child is completely ready for school at a specified time.

Always eat breakfast after a child is dressed and ready. When they are running late, children can be put into cars in their pajamas, provided you have a change of clothes and an instant breakfast.