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Teaching Young Children to Sleep Through the Night

By six months of age, most children are able to sleep through the night. It is, however, normal for all children to wake up only briefly and quickly fall back asleep. Problems develop when children wake up and have difficulty falling back to sleep. These children may scream for their parents or if older, they may get up and go into their parents' bedroom because they know how to fall back asleep without their parents' help (e.g., having their parents rock them back to sleep).

These problems, when chronic, can become very frustrating to parents. The following program has proven effective for many families with these problems. The goal of the program is to help teach children who are at least six to nine months of age, how to fall asleep by themselves.

This program is designed for use if a child cries, screams, or won't stay in bed on a regular (nightly) basis after waking up during the night. It involves parents making sure their child stays in his or her room and having parents wait for gradually increasing amounts of time before going in to check on their child. The program can be very difficult for parents since they must ignore their child's crying and/or screaming. Although the first few nights of the program can be rough, great improvements are typically seen in less than ten days. It is usually best to start the program at a time (e.g., Friday night) when the parents do not have to work the next couple of days. You may not get much sleep the first few nights!

***Provide a bedtime routine.** Develop a calming pre-bedtime routine that is repeated every night. Such a routine could include a light snack, a bath, a bedtime story, etc. It is very important to put your child to bed each night while he or she is tired, but still awake. Children must learn to fall asleep by themselves.

***Take Five minutes.** During the first night of the program, when your child wakes up and screams, wait five minutes before going into your child's bedroom. Likewise, if your child comes into your bedroom, quickly return your child to his or her own bed and leave the room closing the door. It may be necessary to lock the door. When the five minutes is up, open the door and offer brief encouragement, if your child is in bed. Do not pick up your child. Offer a brief pat and reassurance; then leave the room, closing the door. If your child continues to scream, wait ten minutes before going back in. For the third and subsequent checks, wait fifteen minutes between checks. You should continue to leave the room for specified periods until your child falls asleep. If your child falls asleep and then awakens again in the same night, the schedule starts over for that night. Continue this routine until it is time to get up in the morning.

***Spend little time reassuring.** You should spend no more than two or three minutes reassuring or encouraging your child during each check. The purpose of the check is to reassure your child and yourself, not to make you child stop crying and fall asleep. The goal is for your child to learn to fall asleep alone without being rocked or held, lying next to you, etc. Only continue checking on your child if he or she continues to cry, scream, or fuss.

***Increase to ten minutes.** The second night of the program involves waiting ten minutes before going in for the first check. Wait fifteen minutes for the second check and twenty minutes for each subsequent check.

***Add five minutes.** Each subsequent night, add five minutes to the initial check time. See the chart below:

How Long to Wait Before Checking on Your Child

DAY	1st CHECK	2 nd CHECK	Remaining Checks
1	5 mins.	10 mins.	15 mins.
2	10 mins.	15 mins.	20 mins.
3	15 mins.	20 mins.	25 mins.
4	20 mins.	25 mins.	30 mins.
5	25 mins.	30 mins.	35 mins.
6	30 mins.	35 mins.	40 mins.
7	35 mins.	40 mins.	45 mins.
8	40 mins.	45 mins.	50 mins.
9	45 mins.	50 mins.	55 mins.
10	50 mins.	55 mins.	60 mins.

***Use for naps also.** Use this schedule for your child's naps too. However, if you child does not go to sleep after about one hour, end the nap time. End the nap time, too, if you child sleeps for a while then wakes up and fusses and/or cries.

***Consistency.** It is important to follow the schedule consistently.

***Improvements are usually seen within ten days.** Most families see dramatic improvements within ten days. If you child, however, is not sleeping through the night within ten days, continue with the program, adding five minutes to each check time for every additional day the program is used.

***Use praise for appropriate behaviors.** Remember to praise and/or reward your child in the morning if he or she did well during the night. If things did not go well during the night, do not lecture or reprimand your child. It is important to focus on positive improvements.

***Additional suggestions.** Additional suggestions for helping your child learn to sleep through the night include: increasing you child's daily exercise, limiting daytime naps, and having a consistent bedtime.