

WHEN CHILDREN CAN'T SLEEP

by Sally and Brian Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

A parent shared this concern with us this week and asked our advice. “Our two year-old daughter doesn’t want to sleep at night. We try to wear her out, but it doesn’t help. She sleeps so deeply in the daytime that she is still ‘out cold’ when we get her up.”

There are a lot of reasons why kids don’t want to go to sleep at night. They might be frightened because of some experience or because they may feel isolated from the family or even abandoned. Our daughter is about to bring home a lovely little 9 month-old baby from Korea. She has been told not to let anyone else hold him for a month to concrete the bonding process with his new parents. They also told her she should sleep in the same room with him for a week or so, so that when he opens his eyes he sees her and is reassured he has not been abandoned. Little ones need familiarity. If they are constantly moved between people, between homes and between beds they can become very insecure and disoriented. Children also become frightened when parents argue and fight in their hearing. They don’t know how to process what is going on to make their parents so unhappy, so all they can do is internalize it. They become anxious, stressed out and cannot sleep.

Children may experience disturbed sleep because of nightmares. These are often instigated by scary movies, scary games or scary stories. Adults become so desensitized by TV content that they don’t even realize half the time what their kids are watching. The trigger may even be something they see on the news or in an advertisement. I have a very vivid imagination and am now very selective in what I watch because I cannot forget the images presented and they often stay dormant in my mind. I think we need to see ours, and our children’s minds as a blank canvas. It is up to us to monitor what is painted on that canvas e.g. images that leave happy memories and not scary ones that sneak up when least expected, especially at night.

Bedtime needs to be a positive experience for all children. After dinner there should be a winding down time where boisterous play and loud TV disappear. Baths or showers, pajamas, warm milk, a bedtime story (not scary) all help to calm a child down and put them into a sleepy mode. Once in bed, soft music, a night light, a parent’s prayer and a quiet retreat should induce a child into slumber. Children should be familiar with everyday household noises, but it is unreasonable to expect a child to fall asleep when there is raucous laughter, yelling kids or thumping music nearby.

If a child is not falling asleep at night under the above conditions, then you need to look into behavior, routines and diet. Many children have no regular bedtime so their body clock does not dictate a time to be feeling sleepy. Another

thing to consider is what your child is eating before bed. Caffeine and food coloring are known to wind kids up.

If children are sleeping heavily in the daytime and not at night, then it is time to look at all the above factors. Regarding daytime naps, perhaps to induce a quality night's sleep you may need to cut out the daytime nap.

It is important to develop a routine for the whole family. This way, everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing at any given time, and their body clocks will hopefully adjust to meet those expectations. Just make sure that the least exertion is saved for after dinner at night, so the brain can wind down and be ready for rest and sleep.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.