

# A gentle method for getting children off to sleep in their own bed.

By Colby Pearce



In my practice one of the more common struggles reported by parents and caregivers is getting children off to sleep in their own bed. What follows is a simple method to address this issue that I often recommend, and that I used with my own children.

Before I get to the method, I want to advise that there are many and varied reasons why children have difficulty getting off to sleep in their own bed. Time and space do not permit me to go into all possible reasons here. What I would say is that the method presented here is appropriate for many of the reasons why children have this difficulty. It is offered as general advice and is not a substitute for a full assessment and recommendation from an appropriately qualified paediatric sleep specialist.

Firstly, children's sleep patterns are subject to a sleep-wake cycle, which is physiological in nature but strongly influenced by bed-time and wake-time routines. A stable and consistent bed-time and wake-time are important for establishing a stable sleep-wake cycle. That's right, a stable wake-time is just as important as a stable bed-time. If your child is having difficulty getting off to sleep, don't let them sleep in. Wake them up at a consistent time every day, regardless of how long it took them to go to sleep. Their wake-time should usually be approximately twelve hours after their bed-time.

The sleep-wake cycle is also affected by exposure to light and its impact on melatonin production. Melatonin production is implicated in the onset of sleep. Light is thought to suppress melatonin production. So, ensure that your child is in a light-reduced environment for at-least thirty minutes before their bed-time. If your child requires a night light, use an orange one as it has been suggested that orange light does not suppress melatonin production as much as other forms of light.

Now, once it is bed-time, I suggest that you put your child to bed and sit or lay alongside them for approximately twenty minutes. In that time, you should read to them and sing them lullabies. Read first; then sing. As with other aspects of parenting and caregiving, consistency is important here. I suggest rotating through a small number of books and a small number of lullabies across consecutive nights. Children draw comfort from the predictability of the bed-time routine, thus preparing them for the separation involved in going to sleep. After a while, the lullabies are likely to become associated with feelings of sleepiness, with the result that the child begins to feel sleepy when the same lullabies are sung to them.

If your child falls asleep during the above, you are free to leave the room. If they are still awake, you move to the next stage of the method. This involves providing the profound reassurance the child requires to cope with separation and go to sleep. If it works, it will circumvent the child's effort to engage in proximity-seeking behaviour, such as calling out,

getting out of bed, searching for you, complaining of having a tummy ache, asking to go to the toilet, and so on.

After you have read and sung to your child, say to them something like “I am just going to put the light on in the next room and I will be right back. You can stay awake until I come back”. Then, you literally walk out of the room and walk back in almost straight away. You acknowledge that the child is okay and then say “I am just going to put the kettle on and I will be straight back. You can stay awake until I come back”. You then do this and when you return to the child you say something like “I am just going to the toilet and I will be straight back. You can stay awake until I come back”. You then do this and when you return to the child you say something like “I am just going to have my cup of tea and I will be straight back. You can stay awake until I come back”. With each separation, you tell the child that you are doing an activity that takes longer and longer to complete. You keep doing this until, when you return to the child, you find them to be asleep.

Speaking of activities that have temporal (i.e.time) meaning is more easily understood by the child than saying “I’ll be back in a minute”. Choosing longer and longer activities involves exposing children gradually to separations, such that they do not become overly anxious, call out or get out of bed. It is important to return to the child before they call out or get out of bed, because parent-initiated proximity is more reassuring than child-initiated proximity. So adjust the separation as required to ensure that you get back to them before they leave their bed to find you! Telling the child to stay awake is an important way to circumvent potential conflict and associated parental frustration, with the result that the child is calmer and more likely to fall asleep. Put in a different way, this is a useful way of making use of “reverse-psychology”.

Playing relaxing classical music softly in the child’s bedroom is a useful adjunct to the above. Finally, enjoy this special time spent with your child. I did, and experienced sadness when my youngest said “dad, I don’t need you to stay with me anymore”.

