

- Bedtime / Sleep

## Rage against the night

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Bedtime battles reflect a real anxiety felt by children, and a consistent routine is crucial in managing it.

WHETHER you're a parent or a child, you're bound to have experienced or been the cause of – one of these fierce bedtime battles.

On the one hand, there are the kids, always keen to get a few extra minutes – or even hours for the most determined – to avoid going to sleep.

On the other hand, there are the parents, torn between the need to make sure their kids get to sleep and the desire to catch their breath after a long day, their patience sorely tested.

It's a perpetual conflict that can lead parents to make decisions that will have long-term repercussions on their child(ren)'s sleep.

So says new research based on the University of Michigan Health C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health. The scientists involved remind us that "establishing a consistent bedtime routine is crucial. When children don't get enough rest, it can impact their physical development, emotional regulation and behaviour."

The researchers, who surveyed 781 parents of children aged one to six in February, drew two main conclusions from this poll: most children are unable to sleep because they are anxious or worried, while some parents resort to makeshift strategies that can cause, if not worsen, their child(ren)'s sleep problems in the long term.

"When this transition to bedtime becomes a nightly conflict, some parents may fall into habits that work in the moment, but could set them up for more sleep issues down the road," explains Mott Poll co-director, Sarah Clark, quoted in a news release.

**Establishing a regular routine**

But there's no cause for alarm. The survey shows that almost all parents (90%) claim to have a bedtime routine in place for their child(ren), including the traditional brushing of teeth (90%), but also reading one or more stories (67%), a bath (54%), a glass of water (47%), or even a snack (23%).

And the environment in which the child falls asleep seems just as important as the bedtime routine. Nearly one in two parents surveyed (47%) say their child sleeps in their own room, 21% in a room shared with a sibling, and 22% in the same room as their parents. To counter any concerns about the dark, parents tend to opt for nightlights (61%), while some (14%) leave the door ajar.

"The sleep environment can have a major effect on a child's sleep quality, including getting to sleep and staying asleep through the night. When possible, children should have their own bed in a room that is quiet, without a lot of noise from other family members," recommends Sarah Clark.

**A predictable bedtime routine provides a sense of security and comfort and signals to the child that it's time to slow down.**

Sarah Clark

Nevertheless, some parents continue to struggle with their offspring's struggles to fall asleep.

More than a quarter of respondents (27%) claim to face this problem on a regular basis, including parents who are less likely to use a bedtime routine, or more likely to turn to screens, or even to stay in the same room with their child until they fall asleep.

In view of this, the researchers recommend not only that bedtime should be a time for relaxation – in other words, that games and activities that are synonymous with excitement or agitation should be avoided – but also that the child should be provided with a safe and secure environment.

"Although this is a normal part of a child's development, it can be frustrating when parents already feel tired themselves at the end of the day," the researcher continues.

"A predictable bedtime routine provides a sense of security and comfort and signals to the child that it's time to slow down," she concludes.

**Talking and listening**

Unable to cope with their children's sleep problems, a handful of parents (19%) say they "often or sometimes" give them melatonin, a compound known as the "sleep hormone," designed to help them fall asleep.

In response, the scientists say that: "although melatonin is a natural hormone that regulates sleep-wake cycles and may be fine to use occasionally, parents shouldn't rely on it as a primary sleep aid." They add that the long-term effects of this hormone remain "unknown."

So what can be done to avoid this daily battle that can leave parents and children alike feeling exhausted?

The authors of this research recommend giving priority to dialogue, whether to create emotional bonds that will reassure the child, or to enable them to better deal with certain fears and worries.

They also recommend reassuring the child, without introducing strategies that could be harmful in the long term. Instead of staying in the room, it might be more appropriate to ask the child if they want you to come back and check them at regular intervals.

This approach "acknowledges the child's fears and offers a reassuring presence, but still maintains a calm sleep environment and promotes sleep independence," the scientists say.

It's a good idea to keep screens of all kinds out of the children's bedrooms, and – if necessary – to do away with naps if the child is getting enough sleep at night. In all cases, parents need to listen carefully and find the right balance, which may require a few adjustments for each individual child. However, experts recommend sticking to the routine once it has been established – a particularly important point. "Being consistent in carrying out that approach will help the child adjust and be more likely to return to sleep," says Clark. – AFP Relaxnews

Graphic: Freepik

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