

Dealing with late-night visits from your child

Adapted from an article by Dawn Margolis. Reviewed by the BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board



Why kids wake up during the night

“Why won't my child sleep through the night?” This is a question many bleary-eyed parents have pondered. Night wakings are a normal part of our sleep cycle, but good sleepers know how to fall back asleep without additional help. Unfortunately, many toddlers and preschoolers struggle to master this skill. If your child counts on you – or some other sleep aid – to help her nod off, she may have trouble drifting off again when she wakes in the wee hours.

Of course, not even the most competent snoozers are immune to sleep disturbances. Common preschooler fears, including monsters, ghosts, or other things that go bump in the night, can make things hard for even the soundest sleepers. Nightmares, which peak between the ages of 3 and 6, also may send your child running for your bedroom. Likewise, any departure from your child's normal routine – a vacation, an illness, or even a change in bedtime – can derail normal sleep patterns.

How to deal with late-night visits

If you and your partner don't mind a family bed – or the occasional nighttime cuddle – there's no harm in giving in to your child's wishes when he wants to climb into your bed in the middle of the night. But if you're trying avoid sharing your bed, consider these possible strategies for coping with a child who won't stay put:

Lose the crutch

Come bedtime, many kids this age still have trouble falling asleep without the comfort of a pacifier, a stuffed animal, a special lullaby, or you. The problem is, if that sleep aid isn't available when your child wakes, he may have trouble dozing off again. Try gradually and gently phase out any sleep aids that your child can't manage by himself during the night. When you put your child to sleep, leave the bedroom exactly as it will be in the middle of the night. If you plan to turn the hall light off when you go to sleep, turn it off now. White noise or soft music is fine – provided it plays all night.

And whatever bedtime routine you follow, it's imperative that you leave the room before your child falls asleep so he doesn't wake up wondering why you're no longer there. Just remember that this may be a long, hard process. Success won't come overnight, so be patient.

Set physical boundaries

Once your child makes the transition to a big bed, you can try to convince her to stay in her room by placing a "magic" gate in the doorway. Some parents feel comfortable with this hardline approach, and some don't. Trust your instincts.

Be consistent

Develop a plan and stick with it. At 3 a.m. it's easy to get worn down by your child's pleas – no matter how dead set you may be against co-sleeping. But if he manages to wiggle his way in, even once or twice a week, he's bound to keep trying. So haul yourself out of bed, escort him back to his room, give him a quick kiss, and leave. Be prepared to repeat this routine over and over if necessary – and to load up on coffee the next morning.

If your child is sick or has a particularly bad dream, you may decide it is okay to bend the rules. But, if you camp out in his bedroom rather than allowing him into yours, it will probably be less of a setback.

Address fears

It's perfectly normal for a preschooler to develop a fear of the dark. It is okay to indulge her by leaving on the hall light or installing a night-light. A lovey or other comfort object – such as a special blanket or soft toy – can provide reassurance in the middle of the night. Try reading books or watching shows to help your child talk about and tame her fears

If it is imaginary fears that become the cuprit, you might want to do a “monster search” at bedtime. Check under the bed, inside the closet, and anywhere else these fears may lurk. A spray bottle filled with “extra-strength monster deterrent” (that is, water) can also provide late-night comfort. If you use this approach though, continue reminding your child that monsters aren't real.

Offer incentives

Rewards can be a great way to encourage a resistant child to comply with the nighttime drill. Some parents frown on this method because they feel they're bribing their kids. Learning to stay in their own bed is hard work, and some parents think it is okay to reward children for their efforts.

Set aside time for snuggles

Lots of kids will stay in their own room as long as they know there's snuggle time built into their morning routine. Since your child probably can't tell time yet, tell him to come in when the sky is light, or buy a clock that changes color when he's allowed to wake you up. (You set the time.) If he's a little bit older, show him the numbers to look for on a digital clock so he knows when it's okay to leave his room.

Let your child "own" her bed

When you buy a big bed, let your child pick out the sheets, pillows, and a comforter for it. If your child still takes naps, let her "practice" sleeping in her new bed. Before you know it, she may insist on sleeping there!

Compromise

Consider sharing your bedroom but not your bed. A sleeping bag or nap mat might work, to pull out for your child if he is unable to make it through the entire night in his own room. These items are portable, but not quite as cozy as a real bed. After a few nights or weeks on the floor, your child's own soft mattress may seem more appealing.

How do you handle midnight visits from your child?