

## Nighttime Awakenings - Checking Method

Meltzer / McLaughlin "Pediatric Sleep Problems - A Clinician's Guide"

Nighttime arousals are normal. All children (and adults) wake approximately two to six times every night. Problematic nighttime awakenings occur when your child cannot return to sleep without your help after she has a normal nighttime arousal. To teach your child to return to sleep during the night, you must first teach her to fall asleep independently at bedtime. Once she has learned how to fall asleep without your help, in about 2 weeks, you will see that she starts to sleep longer and longer stretches at night without waking. **Keep in mind that this treatment focuses only on bedtime, so your child's nighttime awakenings will continue for at least the next few weeks.**

If you are currently nursing/feeding or rocking your child to sleep, you must first make changes to this behavior. For example, move the nursing/feeding to the first part of your bedtime routine and then rock her to sleep. After a few nights of rocking your child to sleep, rock her for only a few minutes before placing her in the crib awake. The following provides guidance on how to help teach your child to fall asleep at bedtime without your help once you are ready to place your child into the crib awake.

1. **Have a consistent bedtime routine and a consistent bedtime in place.** For your child, this routine should include the following  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ and should end at \_\_\_\_\_ p.m.
2. **At the end of the routine, you should place your child in her crib awake and leave the room.**
3. **You can then check on your child as often as you want, but the longer you can stay out of the room, the better!** If your child gets more upset by your visits, then don't go in as often. For the first few nights you should check on your child every \_\_\_\_\_. After that, the time between checks should increase by \_\_\_\_\_ every night.
4. **When you check on your child, the visit is brief and boring.** These checks are for you to say, "I love you, it's sleeping time!" and to make sure your child is safe and okay.
5. **It is best if you do not pick your child up to comfort her, as she could snuggle into your shoulder and go right to sleep.** Then all she has learned is that if she cries long enough you will "rescue" her. However, if you feel as if your child is past the point where she will be able to calm down without a brief interaction, you may pick her up for a couple of minutes to try and calm her

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down. However, she must be returned to her crib awake. If when you put her back in the crib she becomes even more distressed, it may be better in the future to not pick her up again.

6. **When your child wakes during the night, you should respond immediately and consistently.** For your family, this response should be
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## Important Things to Remember

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- Your child is crying at bedtime because she is tired and knows how to fall asleep only with your help. She will still be very happy to see you in the morning and there will be no short-term or long-term damage by doing this sleep training.
- The second night will likely be worse than the first night! On average, most children cry 45 minutes the first night at bedtime. On the second night, most children cry 90 minutes. By the third night, most children cry about 20 minutes. So, you have to be prepared to do at least 3 nights of this intervention. If you “rescue” your child after prolonged crying and then help her fall asleep (e.g., rocking, nursing), all she has learned is that prolonged crying will get her what she ultimately wants, which is you helping her to fall asleep.
- Although unlikely, it is possible that your child will throw up. To prepare, have a second set of sheets on the bed with a pad in between and a second set of pajamas ready to go. If your child vomits, take her out of the crib and remove the dirty sheets, clean her up and change her pajamas. Then return her to the crib. Although this sounds terrible, it is necessary because children as young as 6 months can learn to vomit on demand. So if you help your child fall asleep after she vomits, she may learn to vomit every night until she gets what she wants, which is you helping her fall asleep.
- Listening to a baby cry when she is learning to sleep independently is very challenging. Here are some strategies you can use to help yourself manage your frustration, worry, guilt, and irritation (all of which are normal feelings!):
  - take a bath;
  - listen to music;
  - meditate
  - exercise;
  - talk on the phone;
  - play a game;
  - enlist the support of your partner, friends, and/or family to take turns with you monitoring your child so that you can take a break to have time for yourself. This can also be very helpful for children who need their sleep managed in the middle of the night. Taking turns with a partner can help each of you get much needed rest.

*Although challenging, this treatment is very successful as long as you are consistent and follow through with all of the recommended steps. Keep in mind that you are doing this to help your child learn to sleep. The short-term benefit is*



*that both you and your child will start sleeping better. The long-term benefits are numerous, including improved child and parent mood, improved parent-child interactions, and improved family functioning.*