

Nighttime Awakenings - Sleep Training

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 he has a normal nighttime arousal. To teach your child to return to sleep during the night, you must first teach him to fall asleep independently at bedtime. **This treatment can be very challenging, as it does involve a fair bit of crying, so it is strongly recommended that you have support from your spouse/partner, a friend, or a family member.** That said, in less than 1 week, you should see significant improvements in your child's ability to fall asleep independently at bedtime and to return to sleep following normal nighttime arousals. The following provides guidance on how to help teach your child to fall asleep at bedtime without your help.

- 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.

- At the end of the routine, you should place your child in his crib awake and leave the room.
- You should go in to check on your child only if you are concerned about safety (e.g., his leg is stuck in the crib) or health issues (e.g., he has thrown up).
- When your child wakes during the night, you should ignore protests, again checking on your child only if you are concerned about safety or health.

Important Things to Remember

- Your child is crying at bedtime because he is tired and knows how to fall asleep only with your help. He 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 him fall asleep (e.g., rocking, nursing), all he has learned is that prolonged crying will get him what he ultimately wants, which is you helping him to fall asleep.

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- Although unlikely, it is possible that your child will throw up. To prepare, have a second set of sheets on the crib/bed with a pad in between and a second set of pajamas ready to go. If your child vomits, take him out of the crib/bed and remove the dirty sheets, clean him up and change his pajamas. Then return him to the crib/bed. 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 he vomits, then he may learn to vomit every night until he gets what he wants, which is you helping him fall asleep.
- Listening to a baby cry when he is learning to sleep independently is very challenging. Here are some strategies you could 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; or
 - enlist the support of your partner, friends, and/or family to take turns monitoring your child so that you can take a break to have time for yourself.

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.