When your child's bedtime seems too late, or, will I ever get a late night alone with my spouse again?

A mom recently wrote to us about her grade school aged child's bedtime creeping later while her wake up time stayed the same. She wondered how to reclaim the earlier bedtime.

Many parents notice as their kids get older, they seem to take longer to fall asleep at night or push their parents for a later bedtime. This trend is largely biological– the older kids get, the less sleep they need. Also as kids age, their body clocks naturally signal them to stay up later at night and sleep later in the morning. Sometimes children are worried about something and this stress prevents them from falling asleep. Parents should ask their kids what they think about while lying in bed at night. However, many times the child is just fine emotionally but begins shifting sleep patterns anyway.

According to sleep experts, adults function best on 7-8 or more hours of sleep per night. In kids and teens, a wide variation exists for how much sleep is sufficient for any individual. In general, if your child is easy to awaken in the morning, cheerful, able to concentrate during the day, easily completes school work and homework and is not having emotional outbursts, then she is sleeping enough. So, when your grade school child transitions from getting 11-12 hours of sleep per night to getting 10, if her days are still rosy, then this sleep shift is okay. Some people just don't need very much sleep.

If your child needs more sleep, it's tough to simply move his

bedtime up earlier. To him, the sudden change will feel like he flew from California to New York. A gradual approach works best. Put your child to bed first very near the time that he is already falling asleep, even if that seems inappropriately late.

For instance, if your child won't fall asleep until 11:00 pm, establish a soothing night time routine that ends with reading in bed or listening to soothing music for a few minutes, and turn out the lights out at 10:45 pm. Avoid television within an hour of sleep time because this can interfere with falling asleep. No matter how late he fell asleep, even on weekends, make sure he wakes up at the same time every morning. Once he falls asleep consistently within a few minutes of lights out, move the bedtime another fifteen minutes earlier. Continue to do this until the daytime sleep-deprivation symptoms have resolved. A child may still need an alarm to wake up in the morning but if he is well rested, he should wake easily.

Be sure to limit or avoid caffeine (found in soda, tea, coffee, some sports drinks, and chocolate) because caffeine stays in the body 24 hours and hinders falling asleep. Also, make weekend sleep routines, including wake up times, as similar to weekdays as possible. If you allow a child to sleep until noon on Saturday and Sunday, he will never be able to fall asleep early on Sunday night and he will start the school week sleep deprived.

Time to end this post. I've got to go put my kids to bed. Sweet dreams.

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