Beware the bewitching hour



Every day across the United States, sometime between 4:00 to 5:00 PM, millions of small children are crying and whining. Welcome to the bewitching hour.

In our offices it’s bedlam during that hour. The phones start ringing off the hook: daycare called mom to report Johnny has a fever, Mildred came off the school bus bleeding from a gash from a flying lunch box, and help, the coach won’t let Mary play lacrosse until her school form is signed.

Meanwhile, you are trying to get home from work/ fix dinner/ walk a cranky baby/order new cleats for Jared, or all of the above, likely at the same time.

Resign yourself. Even if your kids are well-fed, napped and had a great play date that day, the bewitching hour can still happen. Think of it as Colic: Part Two. Some think colic is related to the difficulty of young nervous systems trying to adjust to nightfall. We’re not sure anyone ever grows out of that stage! We just hide our crankiness better as adults. When you think about it, it’s a hard point of day for adults, even childless ones. After a full day around the house or at work, you’d rather curl up on the couch and read a good book than grapple with, well, anything. Remember those ads for bath soap? “Calgon take me away.”

I remember when my oldest was a toddler. At the bewitching hour I'd stare out the window looking for my husband's car as he drove home from work. We'd have conversations like this, "Daddy should be home any minute. Let's go to the window and see. No Daddy? Let's read a book on the porch and watch for him. No Daddy? Then let's move to the lawn. I'm sure he will be in the next car."

Your best defense against your desperation at this time: drill down to the basics: eat, sleep, drink, pee, poop. Make sure they are all going okay entering the bewitching hour- for your kids and for YOU! You may be too harried to notice that you did not drink anything for hours and a dehydrated dad will feel like he's hallucinating during the bewitching hour.

When my oldest was three and my younger child was one, I surprised the furnace repair guy by cooking dinner at two in the afternoon. The crock pot is your friend. A crock pot dinner will cook itself. Do everything possible: cook the dinner, set the table, give the baths and make your phone calls before the hour hits.

If you are picking the kids up from daycare, make sure you have something healthy for them and yourself to munch on in case everyone is starving. Alternatively, pack a dinner for the daycare teachers to give to your children before you pick them up. These strategies will prevent your children's hunger from fueling the bewitching hour. Additionally, having a healthy snack prevents them from becoming so full from goldfish crackers that they later refuse to eat their meal. Even if your kids eat dinner before you, they can join the adults at the dinner table and eat some fruit or veggies or have a cup of milk, allowing for some quality family time.

Several years ago during a particularly horrific bewitching

hour, Dr. Kardos's three children melted down simultaneously. In desperation, she grabbed the video camera for some footage of one five-year-old and twin two-year-olds all tantruming at the same time. Now the replay is as entertaining to her family as the funniest of America's Funniest Videos. Sometimes you have to use humor and remind yourself that you might, one day in the not so far off future, miss this time.

And don't forget. Just as you are questioning whether or not you will go insane… there are times when the bewitching hour will go smoothly… at least until you wake up!

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