

Nighttime Awakenings—Parental Presence

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. Once he has learned how to fall asleep without your help, in about 2 weeks, you will see that he 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 your child to sleep. After a few nights of rocking your child to sleep, rock him for only a few minutes before placing him 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 the crib awake and then stay with him until he is asleep.** For the first few nights, you can comfort or interact with your child by rubbing his head or providing verbal reassurances ("I love you, it's sleeping time").
3. **After a few nights of your child falling asleep in the crib with you present, you have two choices:**
 - a. ***Move half the distance from the crib to the door and stay on the floor until your child is asleep.*** After 3 to 5 successful nights (e.g., limited crying), move to the doorway and remain until your child is asleep. After an additional 3 to 5 nights, move into the hallway and remain until your child is asleep.
 - b. ***Stay with your child for a few minutes and then take a short break (1–2 minutes), returning and staying with your child until he is asleep.*** Each night, the break should get longer and longer, with the goal of your child falling asleep when you are not in the room. You should always return to ensure your child is asleep, and if not, stay with him until he does fall asleep.
4. **It is best if you do not pick your child up to comfort him, as he could snuggle into your shoulder and go right to sleep.** Then all he has learned is that if he cries long enough you will "rescue" him. However, if you feel as if your child is past the point where he will be able to calm down without a brief interaction, you may pick him up for a couple of minutes to try and calm him down. However, he must be returned to his crib awake. If when you put him back in the crib he becomes even more distressed, it may be better in the future to not pick him up again.
5. **When your child wakes during the night, you should respond immediately and consistently.** For your family, this response should be _____.

(continued)

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!
- 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 him out of the crib and remove the dirty sheets, clean him up and change his pajamas. Then return him 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 he vomits, then he may learn to vomit every night until he gets what he wants, which is you helping him fall asleep.

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.
