

“Bedtime rituals should be consistent from night to night, soothing and relaxing”

— *Dr. Judith Owens, pediatric sleep disorder specialist*

Better Bedtimes

Strategies for helping kids wind down and get a good night’s sleep By Aviva Patz

ANY PARENT WHO’S witnessed a Jekyll-to-Hyde transformation in her overtired child knows that sleep is as important to a growing body as food and exercise. But that doesn’t make bedtimes any easier. There’s always homework to finish, teeth to brush, and that last glass of water to drink. So how do you get kids to hit the hay without nagging — and to sleep well once they do? On the following pages, you’ll find solutions for doing just that, including bonding rituals that make bedtime something to actually look forward to, and tips on how to turn a bedroom into a sleep haven.

BY THE NUMBERS

According to a poll on the nonprofit Web site KidsHealth (kidshealth.org), 62 percent of children ages 9 to 13 aren’t catching enough z’s. So how much sleep should they be getting? Here’s a guide from the University of Michigan Health System.

6 to 7 years	10½ to 11 hours
8 to 9 years	10 to 10½ hours
10 to 11 years	9½ to 10 hours
12 to 13 years	9 to 9½ hours

A Peaceful Slumber ➔ To read about how one mom ended her son’s anxiety-induced nightmares, see *Creative Solutions*, page 33.

* Spend Time Together

"My eight-year-old daughter used to make excuses to stall bedtime," says Newbury Park, California, mom Laurie Hurley. Her solution: turn bedtime into bonding time. "Besides having her wash up, I make a big deal of applying moisturizer, spraying her sheets with a lavender mist, and tucking her in," says Laurie. "She loves having my undivided attention and actually looks forward to bedtime."

* Create a Soothing Space

Before his room makeover, six-year-old Justin Richards of Rome, Georgia, was often too wired at bedtime to sleep, a situation aggravated by his autism. After trying several strategies, the Richardses changed the mood in his room. They removed distracting electronic toys, painted the walls a deep ocean blue, added an electric aquarium for white noise (see box at right), and began playing Mozart CDs at bedtime. "It may sound New Age," says mom Donna, "but the tranquillity in Justin's bedroom has completely changed his life and ours."

* Unwind Together

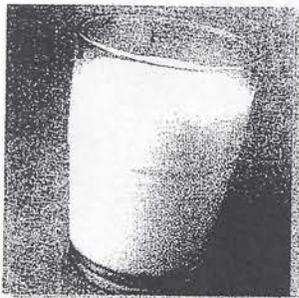
Talking is the key to winding down for some kids, including Kate Kelly's three sons. "After the boys wash up and put on pj's, we snuggle and share the day's best, worst, and weirdest," says the Pelham, New York, mom. "It gives them a chance to process the day's events and helps clear their minds for sleep."

* Make Reading a Reward

For the Wall boys of Florence, Massachusetts, the last half hour before bed is always reserved for reading. "The kids are old enough to read to themselves, but my husband and I often take turns reading chapter books to them," says mom Ellen, an associate editor at *FamilyFun*. "It's a fun way to spend time together and helps keep us in the know about what they're reading."

Tried-and-true Sleep Aids

Some home remedies get passed down from generation to generation. The reason? They work. Here, we get the scoop on time-honored tricks from Dr. Judith Owens, a pediatric sleep disorder specialist and coauthor of *Take Charge of Your Child's Sleep: The All-in-one Resource for Solving Sleep Problems in Kids and Teens* (Marlowe & Company, 2005).



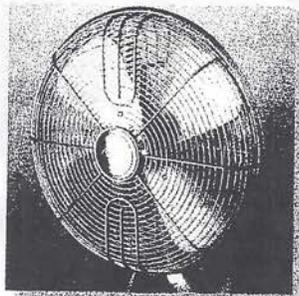
A Glass of Milk

Milk contains tryptophan, an amino acid that acts as a mild sedative. "It's like the Thanksgiving turkey effect," says Owens. A glass of milk — warm or cold — will also keep your child from going to bed with an empty stomach, which may help him sleep better.



Back Rub

Chalk it up to the power of touch. "Studies suggest that massage, or touch therapy, decreases stress hormones," says Owens. "It's also a positive interaction between you and your child, which feels good and helps her relax."



White Noise

"The neutral sound eliminates distracting noises in the environment so your child can drift off to the Land of Nod without interruption," says Owens. And if you use it regularly, it may become a "sound track to sleep": as soon as your child hears it, she'll feel drowsy.



Lullaby or Soft Music

Music is soothing, certainly. Lullabies, especially ones your child heard as an infant, may also elicit early memories of feeling safe and content, back when your child drifted off in your arms and slept, well, like a baby.