



Toddler Roaming in the Night

Understanding what makes your toddler tick - the key to a happy, well-balanced child



Latest News

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As soon as your toddler outgrows his cot, and makes the transition into a 'big bed', there may be some high jinks at bedtime. Some children simply find that this new found freedom is a wonderful excuse for prolonged bedtimes, plus frequent visits to mom and dad's bedroom throughout the night! If you have no issues with this, and love having your toddler sleep with you, read no further! Seriously though, many parents *do* want to foster night-time independence in their toddlers, and really do feel quite desperate at the thought of another night spent negotiating with a roaming toddler.

Before looking at bedtime and sleep itself you need to be sure your toddler is primed for good sleep habits. A **clean bill of health** is a good start, as is a **sleep zone** that supports sleep. Make sure his room is entirely safe so that he cannot harm himself.

At this age, he already has deeply entrenched expectations and associations related to where and how he goes to sleep, and you can use them to your advantage. Keep the light very dim and muted or use a night light, so that your toddler is never left alone in the dark. His imagination is developing at this age, which might make him fearful of dark shadows.

By now you know the importance of a regular day sleep **routine**, but a regular bedtime routine is just as important. Bedtime is often the period of time when your little toddler is at his most unsettled. If there is no pattern to his bedtime rituals such as a quiet bath, followed by the last drink of the day (that's milk, not wine!) in a calm sleep zone, your little toddler will not begin to recognize the necessary sensory cues that prompt sleep.

Remember **separation anxiety** is real, and a normal phase of toddler development that may affect sleep. This phase will pass, but while it lasts, to avoid long term bad habits developing, be firm about not falling into the trap of feeding, rocking or co-sleeping if these are habits you do not wish to encourage. At this stage your toddler may become anxious at bedtime, and may call out to you frequently during the night, or come through to your room due to fears of being alone. This is typical at this age, as your toddler is developing imagination and may begin to suffer from nightmares and imagined 'boogymen'. Use strategies to normalize separations for your toddler by playing games during the day such as peek a boo and hide and seek. Every toddler is different and the degree to which yours will be affected may vary substantially from other toddlers you know.

When you are ready to tackle the situation, bear the following in mind:

- **Boundaries** need to be clearly set, and negotiations can happen within these predetermined boundaries. Your toddler needs to understand clearly the sleep boundaries you have for him. All the role players in the care of your toddler need to agree on sleep boundaries.
- Keep a **night light** on in his room or in the passage or bathroom, so that he is not in the dark should he wake.
- **Limit television** completely for at least two to three hours before bed as this has been linked to fears and increased nightmares.
- Encourage the use of a **comfort object** such as a blanket or a soft toy, and keep it in his bed so that bedtime holds that attraction of his special sensory comforter. It will also be available for comfort when he wakes in the night.

Let's do it

At bedtime, if your toddler begins to negotiate or protest or jumps out of bed within minutes of you leaving the room, he needs to be taught how to put himself to sleep. This is what you must also do when he comes through to you at night. At some stage (yes, it will happen to you) many toddlers wake up and wander through to their parent's bedroom. Begin by

instilling a boundary and consistently lead your toddler back to his bed when this happens. The goal is to have your toddler sleep in **his bed**.

- Walk him back to back to bed, without admonishing him or raising your voice. Stay calm, confident and focused and encourage his comfort object.
- Respond by **acknowledging** his request: Say to him "I know you want me to stay with you"
- **Empathise** so he feels understood by mirroring his request: Say to him "I would love to stay with you"
- Give a **reason**: Say to him "But I can't because it is time to sleep"
- Offer an **alternative** solution. Say to him "Why don't you rather lie here with your special teddy, and I'll sit on the bed next to you"
- Set a **boundary**: Say to him "If you lie down and go to sleep, I will sit with you until you fall asleep"
- **Give a consequence**: Say to him "**If you get up again, I will have to leave**".
- For as long as your toddler stays in bed and makes an effort to be quiet and go to sleep, sit with him until he falls asleep (no matter how long it takes, so be prepared for this). You must stick to your end of the deal if he sticks to his.
- If he breaks his end of the deal, by getting up, you must remind him about the deal you made, offer him a chance to try again, but if he resists, then get up and leave the room and close the door so that he can't follow. It is important that he remains in his room so if he is able to open the door himself install a latch. Don't worry about leaving him behind a closed door. You are simply making sure that his room is containing him much the same as he was contained in his cot before. This is why it is important to have a night-light on and to make his room a safe environment for him.
- From outside the room, tell him you will return when he gets back into bed.
- As soon as you see/hear him get onto his bed, OR after **one** minute of crying (whatever happens first), go back in to his room quietly and calmly. Resist the temptation to raise your voice.
- If he is crying, calm him down with a hug, encourage his comfort object, wait until he has stopped crying, then re-negotiate with him. (Remember to acknowledge and empathise with his request, then give him a reason, a boundary and a consequence).
- Leave the room if he does not comply with the boundary you have offered him (which is to stay with him until he falls asleep provided he lies in his bed). Close the door.
- Return immediately to him if he does get back into bed, and praise him for listening to you. Reward him by staying with him until he falls asleep. If he cries and bangs on the door, wait for **two** minutes before you return to re-negotiate with him. Remember to stay calm and focused, never raise your voice and offer him lots of calming stimuli such as a hug and his comfort object. He needs to be calm again before you can re-negotiate with him. Be prepared for this to take some time.
- Keep going in this manner – return to him as soon as he is back in bed, OR if he will not stay in his bed and bangs on the door, **increase** the period of time before you respond to him by one minute each time until he eventually falls asleep.
- Repeat the procedure each time he wakes during the first night. If he complies with your boundary (by staying in his bed) always reward him by staying with him as you have promised (no matter how tedious you may find this in the middle of the night) until he falls asleep. If he will not comply (by jumping out of bed and running away), leave the room, close the door and leave him for **one** minute until you return quietly and calmly to re-negotiate! If you do have to leave the room, **increase** the period of time by one minute each time, until he eventually falls asleep.

By the second or third night, your toddler has probably realised that if he does as you ask him (which is to stop the high jinks at sleep time), you *will* sit with him on the bed until he goes to sleep at bedtime, and if he wakes during the night. When this is consistently happening, it is time to move to the next step. Be patient, it may take time to get to this step.

- Begin bedtime in exactly the same way, but tell him (by acknowledging empathising and reasoning with a boundary and a consequence) that you will no longer be sitting on the bed with him, but will rather be sitting in a chair alongside the bed.
- As before, complete your negotiation with him. If he complies with your boundary (which is to stay in his bed and go to sleep) you will stay in his room with him, but you will be in the chair. If he does not comply with your boundary, then follow the same procedure as before by going out of the room and closing the door. Continue with the programme as you did before, until he falls asleep.
- When he is happy to stay in his bed and go to sleep as long as you are sitting in the chair (at bedtime and when he wakes in the night), move to the next step. Bear in mind it may take you a few nights to achieve this – be patient, loving and consistent.
- Move the chair away from his bed to another part of the room as close to the door as possible. Repeat the sleep modification steps as above until he is happy to go to sleep in his bed with you sitting in the sleep zone apart from him.

The next step is to move the chair out of the room (tell him that you have given it to the poor children). At bedtime, simply 'linger' in the room, maybe even stepping into the bathroom for a second or two (always reassure him that you will

be back) before returning to 'linger' once more. Repeat the sleep modification steps as above until he is happy to go to sleep in his bed as long as you are 'lingering' around.

The final step (this step may have taken you as little as a few days to reach, or it may be a week down the line by now), is to tell him you need to leave the room for a minute to perform a task. Reassure him that when you are finished your task you promise to return. Do as you have promised and return. Don't forget to praise him each time you return if he has stayed in his bed. Keep popping in and out, but gradually increase the amount of time you spend out of his room. Repeat the sleep modification steps as above until he is happy to fall asleep in his bed as long as you continue to pop in and out.

After a few nights of this you will return after your first absence to find him asleep.
At last! Your toddler has learnt the new technique of falling asleep independently.

Once your toddler is generally sleeping in his bed, you may still find he has the odd night when he is very distressed when he wakes. These are the times when he may be distraught due to a nightmare and imagination fears or separation anxiety. When this happens you may need to allow him to sleep **next to your bed**. By not allowing him into your bed and not making his makeshift bed *too* comfortable, you will not instil long lasting habits. Know that it will not last forever and is usually a passing stage. However, if it becomes a nightly occurrence and is a problem for you, start to make it less easy for him to do. **Always** take him back to his room first. If he insists on returning to your bedroom let him carry his own bedding and settle himself. Allowing your toddler to sleep on the floor next to you whilst you are undoing the unhealthy sleep habit of having him in your bed, may be a necessary process you will need to undertake whilst you foster confidence in him to become independent. However, if your toddler is persistently coming through to you a night, and insisting on getting into **your bed**, this again is a scenario that you could leave as it is if it is not an issue with you. When you are ready to reclaim your sleep space, allow him to sleep on a mattress or some continental pillows next to your bed to help him with the transition to **his own room**.

Remember to always acknowledge his feeling: "I know you want to be in the bed with me."
Then mirror the feeling by saying "I love having you in the bed,"
Then give a reason why he can't be in the bed with you "This is my bed, and there is too little space now that you are bigger"

Offer an alternative: "Why don't you lie on the floor next to me and I'll hold your hand" You will need to follow through on this boundary and be firm about him not getting back into your bed. If he will not lie on the floor next to you, take him back to his bed. At this point, you may have to start adopting some sleep training strategies as mentioned above.

Useful tips:

- If your toddler voices a fear about 'the bogeyman', a very useful trick is to buy a plastic spray bottle from the supermarket. Fill it with coloured water, and label it 'bogeyman spray'. As part of his bedtime ritual, allow him to spray his bed and around his sleep zone with this solution. This empowering gesture will help him to feel in control of his fears. Reassure him that he can use it again should he wake in the night.
- Teach your toddler these sleep rules early and repeat them often:

At bedtime we

1. stay in bed
2. close our eyes
3. stay very quiet and go to sleep

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