

Bedtime Battles? A Few Notes and a New Perspective

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“Bedtime is not for the faint of anything.”

This phrase comes to me as I finally escape from tonight’s almost two-hour bedtime, which resulted in my 5-year-old getting to sleep an hour-and-a-half too late.

As I emerge from the dark bedroom and squint my way into the brightly lit hallway, I decide I’d better take some mental notes to avoid having to endure the forever-long bedtime in the future. The dos and don’ts flood my mind in no particular order.

Note #1: When reading the last story of the night, don’t use an even moderately suspenseful voice—much less a raspy, old, witchy one. Bring characters to life with only funny or regular voices. Otherwise I may have to resort to butt jokes to lighten the mood. Or, the extra bright nightlight comes on, which then leads to totally insuppressible desires to make the best shadow puppets ever. *One more, Mom! You GOT to see this one.*

Note #2. Save time for inevitable shadow puppets.

Note #3. Don’t make the butt jokes too funny. That can lead to uncontrollable giggling that’s eventually transformed into giddy-crazy.

Note #4: If he makes a big deal about it, just let him wear the stupid boxers to bed. I can put a pull-up on his sweaty little body once he’s already asleep. Sure, it’s like trying to put a too-small wetsuit on someone who’s just come out of the ocean, and the whole process is made more difficult when I have to do it while hunched over in the lower bunk, but it still makes things easier overall.

Note #5. Put “extra fresh” water in his cup next to his bed. Do it while he’s brushing his teeth, just before I get to lie down for the first time all day. That’s much easier than waiting until we’ve already gotten in bed, read, put on our shadow-puppet show, and turned out the light.

Note #6. Plan for much, much more time.

Note #7. Start much earlier in the evening.

As I get to my seventh note, I realize I’m making something of a battle plan, like a general preparing for war. I’m preparing, anticipating obstacles to avoid, and proactively planning for contingencies.

The battle strategies above won’t ensure success, but they make it more likely. The battle is always won at some point. He always falls asleep. Eventually. But the casualties in the process—lost sleep, future grumpiness, a relationship potentially damaged by a mother who yells “No! I don’t want to smell your feet!” and so on—can sometimes be ugly. Plus, even as I come up with new approaches, the enemy continues to evolve as well, becoming smarter and developing new stalling techniques.

And then I get it. It's the word "enemy," as it pops into my mind, that does it. Gives me pause. Wakes me up and helps me see the error of my metaphor.

I remind myself that the bedtime "battles" are a thing of the past for my 8- and 11-year-olds, who look forward to reading, and who, despite an inevitable plea for "one more chapter" when we read together, go to sleep without a fight night after night.

I remind myself that sleep is a process I can't force on my littlest guy. He really does control that. I remind myself that sleep is a separation, and I understand why he wants to make bedtimes last as long as possible. After all, for these minutes he has my full attention, and we're a tangle of arms and legs and hugs and hands on faces.

That doesn't sound like a battle at all. That sounds like we're on the same side. That sounds like something to look forward to and delight in and that I'll miss terribly someday.

I'm not naïve enough to say that future bedtimes won't be difficult from time to time. But I've come to the awareness that if I change *my* expectations and plan better and give us enough time on nights when it's possible, then that means we both win.

Negotiating the Nap

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Does it seem like you're spending an hour each afternoon just to get your toddler or preschooler to sleep for thirty minutes? Does approaching naptime produce a daily throwdown of the wills? Do you find your inner Ugly Parent emerging at this time, resulting in a nuclear naptime?

If you want to restore your afternoon oasis, here are a few suggestions—and a new way to think about the ever-elusive toddler nap.

Acknowledge the Audacity

Asking your child to go to sleep in the middle of her day is pretty presumptuous. Would you ask a falcon to pull out of a dive? LeBron James to sit out the third quarter?

An instinctual developmental drive pushes your toddler or preschooler to play, be silly, explore her world—all of which require being awake and on the move. No wonder repeating “Go to sleep” and “Be still” over and over doesn't work. It runs counter to everything inside of your child.

Use a Gentle Approach

Remember that threats are often counterproductive. Saying things like, “If you don't settle down, Mommy will leave,” actually arouses your child's nervous system further and aggravates his anxiety. I know because I tried it more times than I care to admit. And then it takes even longer for them to settle and relax into sleep.

And yelling? Have *you* ever tried drifting off to a relaxed, sweet sleep when a loved one is mad or yelling at you? I've never had the actual experience of trying to fall asleep when someone was yelling “GO TO SLEEP!” at me, but I imagine it's pretty difficult.

Be Mindful of Your Child's Stage

Not only is the nap an unwelcome interruption in the busy day of your young mover 'n shaker, it also represents a significant separation. We often don't think about sleep as a separation, but it certainly is. Developmentally, your child regularly achieves new milestones toward independence. But almost as frequently, there are periods of regression when she is even needier, and when she has a hard time tolerating being alone. Try to stay attuned to such instances, extending more—and longer—handholding and cuddles as she needs them.

Don't Articulate . . .

You want your toddler to sleep; he knows you want him to sleep. From the time he swallows his last bite of lunch, he's steeling himself against sleep. So, when you tell him he has to go to sleep, you're just asking him to fight back.

Lean Into the Need for Play

Instead, employ some naptime nuances, nudging your child toward a more relaxed, ready-to-sleep state through quiet play. This moves him closer to relaxing, while still allowing the drive for curiosity and exploration to be indulged. Gently roll a large exercise ball up and down his body, from shoulders to feet. Take turns. Encourage him to rock his favorite stuffed animal to sleep. Even some reverse psychology might work: “Don’t go to sleep, but let’s see if we can get your lion to fall asleep.” Lead him through some breathing exercises, like pretending you are both blowing out birthday candles really slowly.

Of course, reading a story or singing a few gentle songs can work wonders. In fact, if your toddler falls asleep readily at night, play music at bedtime with which he will make a positive sleep association—then play it for him at naptime.

Offer an Option

If all else fails, it can be effective to say, “You don’t have to go to sleep, but you do need to close your eyes and be still.” This worked like a charm for a couple of years with each of my kids. But, at this stage it might be time to . . .

Nip the Nap?

If they are getting close to age 3, you might want to pull the nap. If they take a long time to fall asleep at naptime and then stay up really late at night, it might be time to experiment with removing the nap. When I pulled the plug on my sons’ naps, I had to be out of the house in the afternoon at the park or somewhere doing something fun or they would fall asleep—or fall apart. Then, they’d fall asleep easily and early, resting better at night. I found that they actually were getting more hours of sleep when I took the nap away, and then my husband and I had our evening together. However, some kids need the nap through age 5 or 6.

Reset Reality

Give up the push toward independence. Just think about the next three months or so and how things can best work for your family. Your children’s schedules and needs will be different in just three months. Think about how best to get them some sleep and use the break instead of worrying about promoting independence or other kinds of things. Just focus on this and that independence will come later naturally.

Embrace the Challenge—and the Change

Remember that naptime battles are normal, and that getting frustrated is normal. Yes, you may occasionally model poor frustration-management strategies, but you also employ smart ones lots of times. You will be frustrated with your child a lot and that’s totally normal. But what they are doing at times can drive you crazy, so it would be weird if you weren’t frustrated. This is a phase, and no strategies are going to work perfectly. In fact, what works for you this week probably won’t next week. But it’s all normal—and it will all be different again in some other wonderful and difficult ways in three more months.

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Common Misconceptions About Parenting

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There are certain “truths” about parenting that we act on without ever really examining them. Maybe we’ve heard them from someone else, or maybe we’ve just fallen into them over time. Either way, they spell trouble for our understanding of and relationship with our kids.

Here are some so-called “truths” about parenting that, when we really think about them, simply aren’t true.

It’s all up to me.

Parents often believe that they are solely responsible for their child’s success and skill building. *Of course* parents have a huge impact on who their children turn out to be, but many other forces are at work as well. One of the most successful contributors to a child’s socialization is in fact her own peers. Some of the behaviors you can’t get her to change with months and months of nagging will disappear in one moment if a peer says something about it. Let her pick her nose once on the playground, and see how long that habit sticks around. So it’s not all on you. Do your best, but know that other teachers, other kids, and other relationships will influence how your child turns out as well.

If I mess up I’ll mess up my kids.

Parents worry that when we yell or lose our tempers a bit, or when we’re not patient, we’re harming our kids. In fact, as long as we’re repairing with them and apologizing and making things right afterwards, small ruptures are actually valuable experiences that teach kids important lessons about how to handle things when conflict arises in a relationship. Abuse is obviously different, but to a huge extent, our mistakes with our kids can teach valuable lessons when they’re a part of an overall loving relationship.

Child development is linear.

Parents often think that kids grow and develop along a straight line that leads from less mature and capable to more mature and capable. Actually, development usually happens in spurts, with plenty of steps backwards along the way. Just when they learn to tie their shoes, you may see them regress in some other emotional or fine-motor skill. Be patient. Development will happen, it’s just that you can’t expect it to be consistent and predictable.

Kids choose when they behave, and when they don’t.

By the time a child is four or five, he knows the rules for the most part. For example, when he’s mad, he’s not supposed to hit or call someone “Fart-face Jones.” But he keeps doing it. And we think, “Why in the world would he do that?” The fact is that he does know the rule, but his immature brain prevents him from remaining in control, emotionally, so he’s at least temporarily *unable* to make good decisions. So it’s not fair for us to expect him to make good decisions all the time. Sometimes he’s actually *incapable* of behaving the way he should. This means we should be talking to him about his thoughts and feelings that led to the behavior, and not just the behavior itself. This is also just one more reason not to say, “How many times do I have to tell you . . . ?”

It's now or never.

Avoid fear-based parenting. Just because she's acting a certain way now doesn't mean you have to worry that she'll act that way forever. You don't have to teach every skill and root out every misbehavior today, or even by the end of the week. Resist the temptation to think, *If I don't nip this in the bud right this second my child will become an ax murderer.* You'll have plenty of opportunities to address behaviors and build skills each and every week of your child's life. So relax a little.

Consistency is the key to good discipline.

Actually, this isn't a misconception, but it needs to be reframed. Consistent love and clear expectations are the key to good discipline. But too often, consistency gets confused with rigidity. Be willing to make exceptions at times, and even to cut your kids some slack when necessary. Yes, children need to know the rules and see you enforce them in a predictable manner; but as you do so, be sure to consider the context of a situation, like the child's age and capability, the time of day, whether someone's hungry, and so on.

I shouldn't negotiate with my child.

It doesn't make you weak to listen to your child's point of view. You can still maintain your authority in the relationship while remaining flexible and open-minded. Be willing to listen to alternative positions, and to reward your child's ability to make good arguments to achieve what he wants. If you're in the right on a position, hold your ground. But if your child can convince you that he's right in this instance, then how much sense does it make to continue to insist that he's wrong?

You can be a parent or a friend.

The problem here is the either-or dichotomy. Yes, you need to be an authority figure for your kids. They need that in order to understand how the world works and to feel less chaotic in their lives. But that doesn't mean that you two can't also share all the elements of a strong friendship—like sharing your lives, laughing and celebrating together, and knowing you've got each other's back.

When we discipline, we need to explain a lot.

I know that sometimes my kids want to scream, "Please stop talking!" Especially when they're in trouble and already understand what they've done wrong. Discipline will be much more effective if we simply address the behavior, *along with the child's state of mind that led to the behavior*, then move on. Too much talking quickly becomes completely counter-productive.

[The original article can be viewed at: http://tinabryson.com/negotiating-the-nap/](http://tinabryson.com/negotiating-the-nap/)