

Bedtime for Toddlers

Bedtime can get challenging as toddlers grow more active and independent. Their sleep patterns can change and suddenly they try new strategies to avoid bedtime. Here are some suggestions:

- **Stop screen use (computer, phone, and TV) in the hour or two leading up to bedtime.**
- **Make your bedtime routine one you can stick with.** Try: bath time, lotion, diaper, pajamas, story, and bed. When you do the same thing every night, your child will know what comes next and expect sleep.
- **Prepare your child for the transition to bed.** Let them know a few minutes before that bedtime is coming. This gives them time to finish playing and get used to the idea.
- **Get your child a “lovey”** (see *“Loveys,” Teddy Bears, and Blankies* article). Try a stuffed animal or a blanket in the crib, but only for children older than 1 year.
- **Help your toddler feel sleepy.** Use low light, low voices, soothing music, cuddles, or a story in your bedtime routine. This helps your child relax and feel tired.
- **Use a night-light for comfort.** Darkness can be scary for toddlers.
- **Don’t use the bedroom as punishment.** Toddlers may think their room is a bad place if they are sent there for time-out.
- **Make sure daytime naps aren’t messing up nighttime sleep.** Some children need their afternoon nap to be shorter, earlier in the day, or even taken away at around 2–3 years old.



SUDDENLY MY TODDLER IS AFRAID OF THE DARK

Fear of the dark is quite common. By 2 years old, most children are deep into the world of pretend and imagination. They don’t fully understand the difference between fantasy and reality. In their minds, anything can happen at night! The dragon from the bedtime story or the clown from the party could appear and scare them.



Also, think about any recent changes in your child's world. Has there been separation from a loved one? Or a new baby, a new babysitter, or a recent move? Even what seems like a minor change can make a child feel insecure and fearful.

Your child's temperament is important, too. Nervous and cautious children are more likely to develop fears. To help your child overcome nighttime worries:

- **Don't tease them about the fear (even in good humor).** Don't try to talk them out of it either. This can prolong the fear and reduce their trust in you.
- **Try to manage your anger and frustration.** Your upset can add to their distress. It also makes it harder for you to respond sensitively.
- **Make one of their special stuffed animals their "protector."** Then include it in their bedtime routine. During the day, act out stories where the protector watches over others.
- **If they usually sleep in their own room and wake up in the middle of the night, resist the urge to bring them into your room.** This sends the message that they are not OK alone in their room. Instead, go comfort them and assure them they are safe. Check out our *Limit Setting* article for more tips.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO



Most children outgrow these fears in a few weeks or months. Your best plan is to be sensitive and patient. Know that this, too, shall pass. If your toddler's sleep challenges are becoming a problem, talk to your HealthySteps Specialist about next steps.