

# ***HOW TO HANDLE EARLY RISERS***



Unfortunately for many tired parents, early morning waking is very common among infants and toddlers. It is one of the most common sleep-related concerns reported by parents. Many young children are simply early risers and are ready to start the day bright and early. However, there are many things parents can do to teach their children to sleep later or to stay in bed longer in the morning.

## **Identifying the Problem**

One of the first things for parents to do is to evaluate their children's general sleep patterns. Parents need to know if their children are rising early because they simply require

less sleep than most children, if they are not getting enough sleep, or if they are being awakened by something such as noise, hunger, or light. Parents should try keeping a record of their children's sleep for one to two weeks. They should note what time their children go to bed, what time they awaken, and any naps they may take during the day. Parents should try to find out if there are consistent patterns to their children's sleep, whether or not their children are usually in good moods in the morning and whether or not they take naps soon after waking up. Parents should then use this information to pinpoint the problem.

## **Children Who Are Not Getting Enough Sleep**

If children sleep for a different number of hours each night, are reluctant to get out of bed in the morning, seem moody or crabby in the morning, or require a nap within a couple of hours of waking, they probably are not getting enough sleep each night. In this instance, parents should try to adjust their children's bedtimes so that their children go to bed earlier, and thus get more sleep.

## **Changing Bedtime**

Parents can try putting their children to bed ten minutes earlier each night until they are putting them to bed an hour or so earlier than before. Parents will probably have to adjust mealtimes and naptimes, too. The key to changing bedtime is to do it gradually. Consistency is important. After the bedtime has been adjusted, it is important that children go to bed at the same time every night. Parents should develop a bedtime ritual that includes three or four quiet activities such as taking a bath, having a light snack, and reading a story. These bedtime activities should be performed every night. Parents should continue to monitor their children to determine if their children are getting enough sleep with the adjusted bedtime. If not, parents can use the same method to adjust the bedtime some more.

### **Children Who Are Awakened By Light, Noise, or Hunger**

If children are awakened by disruptions such as too much light or noise, or hunger, parents can take steps to eliminate such problems.

**\*Light.** Some children are sensitive to early morning light and are awakened by it. Parents should try

to keep their children's rooms dark in the morning. They can try using a thick window shade or a curtain over bedroom windows. This may help children sleep later.

**\*Noise.** Some children are awakened early by noise, either from outside or inside the house. Outside noise can be minimized by keeping windows closed or by muffling sound by hanging a blanket or a heavy curtain in front of windows. If outside noise is a real problem, it may be a good idea, if possible, for parents to move their children's rooms to a quieter place. If inside noise is a problem, parents should try to eliminate it. Parents should try not to enter their sleeping children's rooms unless it is absolutely necessary. They should also try to keep other household members quiet in the early morning.

**\*Hunger.** Many children wake up early because their stomachs tell them to. If early risers are used to eating immediately upon awakening, parents can try to postpone breakfast. Again, this is something that should be done gradually. Even if parents get up with their early risers, they should try to postpone breakfast for ten minutes the first day, adding ten minutes each day until it has been postponed for an hour or so. Children will then be less

likely to wake up early for breakfast. Also, parents should make sure their children are getting plenty to eat during the daytime. This may help to eliminate early morning hunger, too.

### **Children Who Need Less Sleep Than Others**

If children sleep for about the same number of hours per night and are usually happy and ready to start the day in the early morning, they're probably getting enough sleep. In this instance, parents can either shift their children's bedtime to a later hour, adjust nap times, or teach their children to entertain themselves in their beds or cribs until an appropriate hour is reached.

#### **Changing Bedtime**

Parents can try putting their children to bed ten minutes later each night until they have postponed bedtime for an hour or so. Naps and meals will probably have to be moved forward, too. Remember, the key to postponing bedtime is to do it **gradually**. Parents shouldn't expect immediate results, either. It may take some time before children begin rising later.

#### **Adjusting Nap Times**

Many early risers go back to sleep within an hour or two of waking up. These early naps may be contributing to the early rising. To discourage early naps parents can postpone putting their children down for ten minutes each morning until they are napping an hour or so later. This may help children extend night time sleep. Also, parents may want to adjust the amount of time their children nap in the daytime. Children need only so much sleep. Children may be fulfilling too much of their sleep requirements by napping during the day. Thus, the need for sleep at night is lessened. Parents should try to limit daytime naps, either by eliminating one or shortening all of them. Parents should make sure, however, that naps aren't limited to the point that children are overly fatigued by the end of the day.

#### **Teaching Early Risers to Play Quietly in Bed**

If parents' attempts to get their children to sleep later in the morning are unsuccessful, the next alternative is to teach children to quietly entertain themselves until it is time for them to get up. Here are some tips:

**\*Keep your children waiting.** Parents shouldn't rush immediately

to their children when they first call out in the morning. Instead, parents should wait five minutes to see if they go back to sleep or start to entertain themselves. Parents can then gradually lengthen the time before they go to their children. Children will then learn how to occupy themselves in the morning. Parents shouldn't delay, however, if their children seem to be in distress.

**\*Provide toys.** Parents can make sure there are toys nearby for their children to entertain themselves with in the morning. Here are some examples:

›Parents can place a mobile above their children's cribs.

›Parents can put a metal baby mirror to one side of their children's cribs or beds so their children can look at themselves.

›Parents can put a pile of cloth books at the bottom of their children's cribs or beds for early morning "reading."

›Parents can place interesting objects such as bright bits of cloth or soft toys at the bottom of their children's cribs or beds after they have gone to sleep. Parents should make sure that the

objects are not small enough to be swallowed, and will not cause discomfort if children roll onto them while sleeping. Parents can change the objects every few days for variety.

›Parents can tape record a story and leave the tape recorder and the book within their children's reach. Parents can show their children how to operate the recorder to play back the story (provided they're old enough).

**\*Make sure there's light.** If children are to play quietly, they will need light to see by. If children's rooms are dark in the morning, parents can plug in a low wattage night-light.

**\*Make rules.** Parents should let their children know exactly when they can get up (if they're old enough to understand). For example, parents can tell their children that they may not get up until a parent comes to get them in the morning, and until then they must play quietly. Or, parents can set an alarm in their children's rooms, and use that as the signal for getting up.

**\*Practice.** If early risers are toddler-aged or older, parents can practice morning quiet play with

them. Parents can ask their children what they will do when they wake up early in the morning. Parents can show their children where to find their "morning toys" (at the bottom of the bed or crib), and have their children practice playing with them. This way, children will know just what to do when they awaken early in the morning.

*NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

**[www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)**

### **REMEMBER...**

Parents must try to be patient with their early risers. Children can't sleep late just because their parents would like them to. The best thing parents can do is give their children the tools to entertain themselves early in the morning. Don't expect perfection!! It is unlikely that children will be able to be totally silent in the morning. They will probably sing or talk to themselves or make other noises. Parents should keep in mind, too, that there will be times when their children really need them in the morning. At these times, parents should go to their children instead of letting them fend for themselves in their bedrooms.



*Center for Effective Parenting  
Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580*