

Bedtime Stories: Not for Bedtime Only

Cecelia Davidson, Ph.D. CCC-SLP

Children need sleep. Adults can make personal choices about sleep that are related to our needs and desires. Sleep patterns change with social events and work schedules. In adults, sleep patterns also change as a result of stress, illness and unwanted deprivation. These issues affect children also and are often times complicated by developmental or situational disorders. Those issues will not be addressed here. While adults have the liberty to make choices, most parents would agree that children should not have the authority over bedtime schedules. Input into bedtime schedules becomes adjusted with age. However, most adults recognize that for a developing child, a scheduled bedtime is an essential component of training an individual to lead a disciplined life. There is a wealth of Internet based articles, published books, pediatrician advice, and wisdom from grandparents regarding getting children to bed at night and keeping them there. Let's discuss what to do once the child is in the bed.

Sleep is a necessary state of partial or full unconsciousness. The body needs time to rest and restore. It is a state of inactivity that for most of us comes as a welcome break from events of the day. Most families have bedtime rituals with children. These rituals might begin with meal, homework, television, shower, and packing the next day's lunch. The arrangement and prioritizing of the components of the bedtime ritual are as individualized as there are families. A bedtime story is a common ritual across cultures. The stories may be read from a book or part of an oral language tradition. Reading and storytelling traditions with children provide a precious opportunity for communication. I want to draw attention to that window of opportunity further by focusing on what I will call the time of surrender.

Visualize your own personal sleep ritual. There comes a point just before the unconscious episode begins when the body, mind and spirit surrenders. There is physical exhaustion. The involuntary systems of the body win over even our most dedicated efforts to remain awake. When the child "can't fight sleep" and surrenders sometimes only moments before unconsciousness caregivers can provide meaningful and priceless parental communication. This is when the invaluable bedtime story can begin. Bedtime stories are not just for bedtime. I propose that bedtime stories are preparation for the new day that will arrive.

Consider that as your child surrenders, as your child is so exhausted that their mind, body and spirit cannot resist control that you have an opportunity to provide positive ideas during a state of vulnerability. Tell your bedtime story and then wait a few minutes, ready to whisper positive affirmations. Consider your child entering a state of unconsciousness with thoughts similar to these:

- I may have made mistakes today. I forgive myself. I can begin again in the morning.
- I have another opportunity to do my best when I awake.
- I can solve my problems. I won't be defeated.
- Help is available for me when I need it.
- I'm a loved and cherished person.

I hope you get the idea. Have to go now. Night Night.