
PARENTS' GUIDE TO BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Coping with the early riser

By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

THE PROBLEM

Some young children awaken before their parents do, usually between 5 and 6 a.m. These 1- to 4-year-old children are well-rested and raring to go. They are excited about the new day and want to share it with others. They call out from the crib or come out of the bedroom and want everyone to wake up. If no one responds, they make a racket. It doesn't take parents long to figure out that their child is a "morning person."

These children do not awaken early on purpose. They have received plenty of sleep, and they are not tired. Most of them were put to bed too early the night before, took too many naps, or took naps that were too long. Early morning naps that begin within two hours after breakfast also contribute to early morning awakening. Some of these children require less sleep than the average 10 to 12 hours a night that most children between 1 and 10 years of age need. This is often a hereditary trait. Other children begin waking up early in the springtime when sunlight streams through the window; dark shades or curtains easily solve that problem. Other children who are given a bottle in the crib, fed an early breakfast, or allowed to come into their parents' bed early in the morning may develop a bad habit that persists after the original cause (such as too much naptime) is removed.

THE SOLUTION

Reduce naps. If your child is an early riser, assume that he is getting too much sleep during the day. Many children over 1 year of age (and almost all children over 18 months of age) need only one nap, unless they are sick. If your child needs two naps, be sure the first nap doesn't start before 9 a.m. If cutting back to a single two-hour nap after lunch

doesn't help, shorten the nap to a maximum of one and a half hours. Also, make sure your child gets plenty of exercise after his nap, so he'll be tired at night.

Delay bedtime until 8 or 9 p.m. This step, combined with reducing naps, should cure your child of early rising unless he has a below-average sleep requirement. In that case, proceed with the following limit-setting approach:

Establish a rule: "You may not leave your bedroom until your parents are up. You may play quietly in your bedroom until breakfast." Also, tell your child, "It's not polite to wake up someone who is sleeping. Your parents need their sleep."

If your child sleeps in a crib, leave her there until 6 a.m. Put some toys in her crib the night before (but not ones she can stand on). If you put them in before she goes to sleep, she may play with them for awhile, fall asleep later, and sleep longer. If she cries early in the morning, go in once to reassure her and remind her of the toys. Don't include any surprises or treats among the toys or she'll awaken early, as children do on holiday mornings. If she makes loud noises with some toys, remove those toys. If she cries, ignore it. If the crying continues, visit her briefly every 15 minutes to reassure her that all is well. Remind her that most people are sleeping. Don't turn on the lights, talk much, give her a bottle, remove her from the crib, or stay more than one minute.

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THE EARLY RISER

If your child sleeps in a bed, keep him in his bedroom until 6 a.m. Get him a clock radio and set it for 6 a.m. Tell him he may not leave his bedroom until the music comes on, but he may play quietly until then. Help him put out favorite toys or books the night before. If he comes out of his room, put up a gate or close the door. Tell him that you'll be happy to open the door or gate as soon as he is back in his room. If this is a chronic problem, put up the gate the night before.

If you meet strong resistance, change the wakeup time gradually. Some children protest a great deal about the new rule, especially if they have been coming into your bed in the morning. In that case, move ahead a little more gradually. If your child has been awakening at 5 a.m., help her wait until 5:15 for three days. Set the clock radio for that time. After your child has adjusted to 5:15, set the radio to 5:30. Move the wakeup time forward every three or four days.

Don't back down on the rule. If you relent and continue to allow the child to come into your bed, her early morning habits will rarely improve.

Praise your child for not waking other people in the morning. A star chart or special treat at breakfast may help your child wait more cooperatively.

Change your tactics for weekends. Many parents want their child to sleep in on Saturday and Sunday mornings. If this is your preference, keep your early morning riser up an hour later the night before. If you are using a clock radio for your child, turn it off or reset the time for an hour later. As a last resort, put together a breakfast for your child the night before and allow him to watch a preselected videotape.

Call our office during regular hours if:

- Your child's sleep pattern doesn't improve after trying this approach for four weeks.
- Your child has several other behavioral problems.
- You have other questions or concerns.

SUGGESTED READING

Cuthbertson J, Schevill S. *Helping Your Child Sleep Through the Night*. New York, Doubleday and Co, 1985

Adapted from Schmitt BD: *Your Child's Health*, ed 2. New York, Bantam Books, Inc., 1991.

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