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Help Your Child Sleep Alone: The SnoozeEasy Program for Scared Kids

Children should be able to fall asleep on their own. By developing their capacity to soothe themselves, our children master their fears. This mastery and independence will generalize to other aspects of their lives, adding to their sense of confidence and strength as they face their world.

The problem:

Here is a common scenario. A child won't sleep in her own bed. She's afraid. She stalls at bedtime. Every night in order to fall asleep she needs a parent to be present. Her parents tell her not to worry, but she stays worried. She asks, "What if burglars come?" Her parents suggest she think about something else. She says, "I tried that and I'm still scared."

The parents grow weary. They lie down with her on her bed until she sleeps. In the middle of the night, she awakens and cries and again needs her parents to help her fall asleep. Despite their misgivings, the parents eventually allow the child to sleep in their bed most nights.

Some children are afraid to sleep alone. Despite Mom and Dad's reassuring words, looking under beds, and checking door locks, the child is reassured only by a parent's warm body snuggled next to them. Efforts to reason achieve nothing. Everyone's patience dissolves. Arguing and tears may follow. In the middle of the night, more crying awakens the parents. Whether the child is in the parent's bed or in a sleeping bag on the floor, this 7 or 9 or even 11 year-old child is in the parents' room and cannot seem to sleep alone.

If this is happening in your home, perhaps you worry it is because your child has some emotional problem, some deep insecurity. Perhaps you think you shouldn't make her do what she's not ready to do. Maybe this reflects a deep fear that she needs to work out. Can you be cruel to the poor child? Won't pushing her away only traumatize her? Isn't it natural for children to sleep with their parents? But perhaps you have come to feel that this sleep problem is disrupting family life--it takes up a lot of time, robs parents of precious time to themselves, perhaps interferes with the relationship between husband and wife, and sometimes causes conflict between parents and child. Wouldn't the child be more confident and self-reliant if she could face her fears and overcome them? Wouldn't everyone in the family feel better if these fears could be mastered?

The Goal.

We want our children to feel confident and secure, able to relax knowing they are safe, able to seek help when they feel bad, yet able to comfort themselves when bothered by minor worries. We want our children to know their own feelings, identify anything wrong, and talk about problems. We want a balance of independence and closeness. When it comes to sleep, we want them to feel okay about coming to parents occasionally on an anxious night, yet comfortable sleeping alone on a regular basis.

So why is this happening?

As children grow their imaginations grow, as well as their capacity for visualizing potential threats. Kids think about things that can *GET* them. “What if” thinking develops. (What if a burglar got in the house? What if kidnappers tried to get me?) This imagining can result in increased awareness of their own vulnerability. And sleep is when they surrender watchfulness. Sleep is when they feel vulnerable.

Perhaps the problem started after they watched a scary movie. Perhaps they heard about a neighbor’s home being burglarized, or saw a kidnapping reported on the news. Perhaps it started after a car accident. Or perhaps the child has always been an anxious sleeper and has needed a parent present ever since he was a toddler.

A child’s solution to this problem of vulnerability is to seek the protection of parents. When scared, all kids seek the comfort of their parents. Why doesn’t rational discussion work? Rational discussion doesn’t work because your modern adult brain is speaking to a sophisticated but very ancient threat-detection module that has been fine-tuned for the past 200,000 years. *Danger nearby? Stick close to Mom and Dad.* For countless generations kids did sleep with, or very near, parents. Kids with this module survived more often than those who wandered off alone. The must-not-sleep-alone alarm serves a good purpose. It protects kids in dangerous conditions. It doesn’t matter if the alarm is wrong most of the time (i.e., it gets kids to cling to parents when there is no real danger). It only matters if the alarm is right some of the time. If it is, nature keeps it.

It comes down to this. Given a choice, a scared child will always choose the comfort of a warm parent rather than rely on her own resources for comfort. Comforting oneself is a skill one learns through experience, not rationality. If the child thinks a scary thought but waits it out and nothing bad happens, the anxiety subsides and, with practice, the child learns that waiting and relaxing are good strategies. If a child does not try waiting and relaxing, there is no opportunity to learn that self-soothing works. But it is much easier to run to Mom or Dad than wait and relax, so for the child this is not really a difficult choice. She’ll always rely on Mom and Dad as long as Mom and Dad offer comfort. Children who need a parent present to fall asleep have learned to depend on their parents for all their bedtime comfort and have not learned to rely on themselves.

Does anxiety at bedtime reflect some deep-seated insecurity? Does the fear mean there is some deeper psychological problem? Sometimes bedtime fears can be part of a bigger problem with anxiety or depression which might need professional attention, but usually, the answer is no. Every child is afraid to sleep alone sometimes. Most kids who develop chronic anxious sleep patterns do so because a bad habit starts and gets perpetuated. Stress at school, arguments at home, loss in competition, worry about failure, a frightening movie--all these can contribute to an anxious night and increased dependency on parents.

Whether an anxious night here and there turns into a chronic pattern of dependency is determined mainly by how you respond.

Your job is to provide the right kind and right amount of reassurance. By developing his capacity to soothe himself, your child masters his fears. This mastery and independence will generalize to other aspects of your child's life, adding to his sense of confidence and strength in whatever he undertakes. Kids who can comfort themselves are more self-reliant, more capable, more self-confident.

So why do parents allow their kids to sleep with them?

Parents typically answer this question with one of two responses, but often the reality is a combination.

- *I want my child to feel secure. I just can't stand the thought of my child being alone and feeling so scared. I'm afraid that if I push my child to sleep alone when he's not ready, it will really hurt him emotionally or psychologically. After all, sleeping together is natural, isn't it? Maybe he's just not ready.*
- *I want my child to sleep alone but I don't know what more I can do. My child puts up such a fuss! I've tried being reassuring and reasonable and firm but my child is so upset and so persistent. I get impatient and that gets us nowhere. I just end up giving in.*

In most cases, this problem develops because parents do not have confidence in their child's ability to self-soothe, worry that the fear is too much for the child to handle, are not effective in calming the child, and do not effectively set limits.

How do we solve the problem? The SnoozeEasy Program.

If you follow the SnoozeEasy Program, your child will learn to sleep alone, relying partly on comfort from you and partly on self-soothing. Here are the steps you will follow:

1. Develop a healthy bedtime routine.
2. Hold a family meeting to discuss the problem and how you'll solve it together.
3. Start the SnoozeEasy program and follow the rules.
4. Enjoy your success.

What is a good bedtime routine?

The bedtime ritual can be comforting for everyone. The routine should be a relaxing ending to a full day, lasting about 20 to 30 minutes. Regularity is reassuring to children, so try to make a ritual of the same sequence of activities. Be sure to allow enough time so no one has to feel rushed and tense. Notice what your child does to soothe herself. Does she have a favorite place for a favorite stuffed animal? A special method of plumping her pillow? A favorite way of saying goodnight? Foster these rituals and enjoy them with her. Notice your tone of voice. Are you speaking in warm, soothing tones to create a relaxed, positive mood?

You want your child to feel that her bed is the coziest place in the world. Help your child develop positive associations to bed and sleep. Talk about how nice the bed is, how warm and perfect the blankets are, how everything in your child's room has just the right place, how happy her stuffed animals are. You are creating and reinforcing positive associations to bedtime so she can feel cozy and secure.

1. Choose a bedtime hour and stick to it. What is the right amount of sleep? For 6-9 year-olds: 9 to 11 hours; for 10-12 year-olds: 8 1/2 to 10 hours. If your child is tired and grouchy 10 minutes after waking up, more sleep is probably needed.*

2. Make sure all needs are anticipated so your child won't need to get up again. Be sure your child has a glass of water by the bedside, has gone to the bathroom, has a favorite stuffed animal.

3. Go through the preparing-for-bed steps. These steps might include:

- Take a warm bath
- Put on pajamas
- Brush teeth
- Lay out clothes for tomorrow
- Get backpack ready for school

4. Have some time for closeness with your child:

- Talk about something pleasant that occurred today
- Talk about the plans for tomorrow, especially positive things
- Read a story together

5. Hugs, kisses and goodnight.

Follow these same steps every night. Activities before bed should be relaxing, not stimulating. Avoid TV right before bed; stopping is frustrating for some kids. Avoid arguments, angry conflicts, criticism, complaints and discussion of problems. Bedtime is for relaxing!

*If you have any concerns that your child has a sleep disorder (for example, if he snores or is extremely restless) talk to your physician.

The SnoozeEasy Rules.

The purpose of these rules is to communicate clearly to your child what you expect, what is allowed, and what is not okay. Remember, kids like rules. Rules create predictability, a sense of control and security. Follow these rules for a good night's sleep. Stick to them and your child will see that she can rely partly on you and partly on herself for reassurance and comfort.

- Stay put. After bedtime your child must stay in her own bed the whole night. She is not to leave her bed.
- Enter the zone alone. You may be with your child until she is drowsy, but she must be alone when she falls asleep. You may sit on your child's bed, but you may not lie down with her.
- Lights out, no crying out. Your child must not call out, whine, demand, cajole, or bargain after saying goodnight or between "checks." You will offer comfort and reassurance, but only when your child is in her bed, and only when *you* choose, not when she demands.
- Back in 10. You may return to your child's bedroom every 10 minutes to check in, soothe and speak reassuringly for up to two minutes, but no more. You tell her you'll return in another 10 minutes to check on her, and you do so, again offering up to two minutes of soothing every 10 minutes as many times as necessary until she falls asleep. You return by the *clock*, not by crying or calling out.

An alternative to "Enter the Zone Alone" for young kids who are used to having a parent with them until they fall asleep: Sit or stand near your child's bed until she falls asleep. Gradually, over several nights, move farther away from her until you have eased yourself out of her room. From then on, stick to "Enter the Zone Alone."

Should I reward my child for sleeping alone?

Rewards for compliance will help motivate your child, get your child's attention and reinforce effort. *However, the real rewards are security, independence and a sense of competence.* But you should consider rewards to recognize effort and encourage the child. Certainly you should reward your child with praise. *"I am so proud of you. I see you are really trying. It makes me feel so good to see you so confident!"* Other rewards can include food, little prizes, and activities with parents. Best to think of the reward as a fun way to celebrate your child's accomplishment. It is definitely not payment. Rewards that are too big will feel like bribes. Best to keep rewards small. Here are some ideas:

- stickers or stars on the calendar for each successful night of obeying the SnoozeEasy rules (appropriate requests for "check-in" are okay)
- after 7 successful nights, celebrate success by going out for ice cream, a pizza, or having a "games night" with Mom and Dad.

What about punishments?

Forget about it. Punishments don't work very well for this problem. One reason is that when kids are in the grip of fear, they are willing to pay almost any price to get relief. Go ahead, spank me, Take away my Play Station. You definitely should show disapproval if your child breaks the rules. Aim to be brief and pointed: *"I am not happy about this."* Don't make threats.

Getting ready to start: Examine your own part of the problem.

You're almost ready to start the new sleep program, but first you need to ask yourself a question. Are you part of the problem? You want the best for your child, but are your own emotional needs or marital dynamics getting in the way? Almost always the sleep problem arises, at least in part, because parents want to avoid distressing the child. Other factors may also contribute to the problem. Think hard about whether any of these apply to you.

1. *Ambivalence: But sleeping together is natural, isn't it?* It's hard to be firm in setting limits if you're still feeling mixed about this basic issue. Are you still telling yourself that if your child is demanding to sleep with you it must be because she needs it? Try to set your doubts aside and accept that what you are doing is helping your child become a *strong, confident and secure individual*. Remember, when you act with confidence, you are giving your child a clear message that all is safe and there is no need to worry.

2. *Parent's need for affection.* Is your need for affection being met by the child being in bed with you? You can have lots of cuddle time when your child is awake. Create moments of closeness by reading together, cooking together, drawing or working on special projects. Don't let your emotional needs rob your child of a sense of security and independence.

3. *Guilt feelings.* Do you feel guilty for spending too little time with your child because of work or other commitments? It's hard to juggle all your responsibilities and hard to know the best way to divide your time. But if you give in to your child's demands to sleep with you as a way of making up for missed closeness, you are not really helping your child. Instead, carefully review your schedule and see what changes can be made. Even small changes can feel very good to your child-- and to you, too.

4. *Sex avoidance.* Parents need to deal directly with barriers to sexual intimacy. Find a safe way to talk to your spouse about your feelings. Don't use your child as a shield.

5. *Parental anxiety.* Parents can be anxious, too. You might be anxious about separation, being alone, or "hurting" your child by rejecting or frustrating him. If you feel anxious, figure out what it's about and find other ways to comfort yourself.

6. *Avoidance of emotional intimacy or avoidance of conflict with your spouse.* Do you feel awkward or uncomfortable being alone with your spouse? Kids shouldn't be in the middle of parents' conflicts and shouldn't be used to keep peace. Figure out what you need to do to get things back on track so husband and wife can fit comfortably, just the two of you.

Getting closer yet: It's time for a family meeting.

Now you are ready to introduce the new sleep program to your child. At a calm and unhurried time, hold a family meeting (or a meeting between parents and this child). In this family meeting you will:

1. Define the problem and invite ideas for solutions.
2. Set the goal.
3. Outline the rules.
4. Choose a simple reward.
5. Convey your attitude that your child is able to succeed and will succeed.

1. Define the problem. *"We need to find a way for you to feel safe in your own bed. Sleep is one of the best parts of the day! I know you've had scary thoughts and worried feelings, but I bet you'd feel a lot better if we could think of some ways to help you feel comfortable sleeping in your own bed. I know you'll feel a lot more grown up."* Listen with understanding and patience. Help your child suggest some solutions, and agree to try at least some of them. Help your child take ownership of the problem. You want to motivate your child and help him think about how much better things will be if he can get over these fears.

2. Set the goal. *"We want you to be able to sleep in your own bed the whole night. We want you to feel safe and be able to fall asleep on your own without Mom or Dad in your room."* Be definite and direct. Your child can make suggestions on how best to achieve this goal, but the goal itself is not negotiable.

3. Outline the rules.

- Stay put. *After bedtime you must stay in your own bed the whole night. You are not to leave your bed (except to go to the bathroom).*
- Enter the zone alone. *At bedtime we'll have time to talk and read. Then we'll kiss goodnight and you can doze off on your own.*
- Lights out, no crying out. *After you go to bed and we say goodnight, we don't want you to cry out or yell. If you want, we'll come back to check on you in a little while. Tell us if this is what you want.*
- Back in 10. *If you need me to, I will check in with you in 10 minutes to see how you are doing. I'll stay for a little bit to help you relax. If you need me to come back again, I will. But you must wait quietly and trust that I will come back. And you must try your best to relax on your own.*

4. Choose a simple reward. Remember, it is best to think of the reward as a fun way to celebrate your child's accomplishment. Think small and think of shared activities. *After you've gone to sleep on your own and slept in your own bed for 7 nights, I think we should celebrate. What do you think would be fun?*

5. Convey your attitude that your child is able to succeed and will succeed. Your child has the capacity to sleep on his own and master his anxiety. You convey to your child through word and deed that you believe he is safe, that he has the capacity to calm himself, and that his anxiety will not hurt him. You believe that sleeping alone will help your child become a *strong, confident and secure individual*. Remember, when you act with confidence, you are giving your child a clear message that all is safe and there is no need to worry. *I feel really good about this new plan, honey. I know you can do it! This is going to feel so much better!*

Tips on how to calm a scaredy-cat.

Trying to calm a scared child can make parents feel pretty helpless and frustrated. Remember, your attitude, manner and tone of voice are what is most important. Stay relaxed, patient and confident. Here are some suggestions.

- Sympathize. *I know it's scary, honey. I'm sorry. I wish you could feel better.* Accept your child's feelings as they are. Keep your tone warm and soothing. Give a hug and a kiss. Be brief. If you feel pulled into a lot of talk about the fear, pull out. Avoid engaging in debate, argument, or lengthy discussion. Show by your actions that you feel comfortably settled with such issues. Keep it short.
- Reinforce positive associations to your child's room and bed. *You have got such a great room. I love your room! Look at this perfect spot for your (favorite toy). Aren't these blankets deliciously soft? You are so lucky.*
- Redirect attention to something else. Don't *tell* her to think about something else--*get* her to think about something else. Prattle on about the details of your world--your dog's face when he feels guilty, your plans for planting petunias, the pros and cons of buying a new set of tires next Saturday. You are redirecting her attention subtly, naturally. You don't announce it: *"I'm now going to distract you so you can quit thinking those scary thoughts and I can go to bed."* You simply shift the topic to something ordinary. If your child goes back to talking about fears, don't get frustrated or impatient, just sympathize again. Then resume redirecting. Try getting her to help you with some small decision. If she can help you, then she can feel useful and competent. *I'm trying to decide which tablecloth to use when Grandma comes to dinner. The one with red flowers is pretty, but the blue checked one looks good with our china. What do you think?*
- Create a positive mood by talking about things you like and things that make you feel good. Then talk about things the child likes. Be careful not to be effusive, or else the child may feel manipulated. Be gentle. If this increases her protests, stick to neutral topics.
- Your child might feel that he must sleep and may just get more tense and frustrated the longer sleep eludes him. When you give your child permission to remain quietly wakeful, you end the battle, thus helping him relax. *It's okay if you don't sleep right now, honey. It's restful to just lie quietly in your bed. You can let your mind drift and think about anything you want.*
- Use humor. Make up a story that exaggerates the feared object and transforms it into something silly and funny. *That scary robber with the chainsaw you keep thinking about--what if you threw water balloons at him and he slipped and fell on his butt and he landed in thick, gooey mud and he got so mad his face turned bright red and a bull saw it and started charging at him and that silly old robber had to run and run and run all the way to Nebraska.*

Are you ready? Let's start.

At this point, you have taken the necessary steps to prepare for the new sleep program. You have:

1. Gotten the bedtime routine into a healthy pattern.
2. Examined your own feelings about the problem.
3. Held a family meeting to discuss the problem: you've set the goal, established the rules, and chosen a reward.
4. Expressed a positive and confident attitude that your child will conquer his fears and will succeed.

So choose a night to begin, and start!

So what should we expect?

Most kids respond very positively right away. You'll return for a check-in to see your child is sleeping soundly. There may be some initial protest and anxiety, but if you remind kids of the rules, stick to the rules yourself, help kids take ownership of the problem, and act with a positive attitude, you will probably achieve success within a few nights. Many kids are able to fall asleep alone within 15 minutes by the second or third night.

"Back in 10" check-ins can gradually be extended to longer than 10 minutes. For example, on the second night of the program, after saying goodnight you might check back in 10 minutes, and then check in a second time 15 minutes later. (You don't need to announce to your child that you will be doing this.)

Relapses will occur. Do not be worried or discouraged. Simply stick to the program and its rules and good sleep behavior will resume. Don't backslide into old behavior by letting your child sleep in your room "just this once" because you will very quickly have the problem every night all over again. Similarly, be sure to avoid prolonged talks to calm your child or else you will be reinforcing his anxiety. After bedtime, keep such talks brief and you will communicate by your behavior that you are confident he is safe and can manage just fine by himself.

The toughest part is making the decision to start dealing with the problem. You have to make up your mind that now is the time to start, that you are ready and your child is ready. You will probably worry that your child will protest, cry, wail, rebel and demand you keep doing what you've been doing. More often than not, parents expect much more difficulty than actually occurs. In reality, parents are usually surprised at how smoothly and easily the child adapts.

What do I do about...? Problems, problems, problems!

- *My child keeps calling out.* Firmly repeat the “don’t cry out” rule, saying you know he can wait and you expect him to try. Keep it very brief. Do not discuss, threaten, or get mad. Then ignore any further calling out. Stick to “Back in 10.” Remember, your child needs to be quiet and wait to get your attention. This way your child begins to learn how to rely on his own self-soothing.
- *My child tries to bargain with me and demands I come back in 5 minutes or 2 minutes.* Repeat the 10-minute rule. If you sound like a broken record, that’s good. Don’t negotiate. Again, communicate to your child that you are confident he can handle it.
- *What if my child keeps needing check-ins every 10 minutes again and again and again?* Parents often worry about this but it seldom happens. After the first night or two, kids learn the routine won’t change and settle themselves down.
- *My child wants me to stay upstairs until he falls asleep, but I want to be downstairs.* Don’t bend on this one. Repeat the rules. Again, tell your child that you will check in and provide reassurance every 10 minutes if necessary, but you expect him to stay put and stay settled while you are downstairs. Again, you convey this with confidence that he will succeed.
- *My child gets up and comes into my bedroom, really scared, and gets in my bed.* Do the no-talk walk. Take her hand and walk her back to her bed. On the way, keep talking to a minimum. Re-state the “stay put” rule in a firm but neutral voice. Offer two minutes of comfort, then leave. Offer a “back in 10” if necessary. If your child wakes you in the middle of the night you will of course be sleepy, but don’t give in to the temptation to let your child crawl into your bed. Wise up and get up!
- *Sometimes we don’t even wake up when our child gets into our bed.* Do what is necessary to be sure you do wake up: keep your bedroom door closed (maybe even locked); hang a bell or frying pan from your door to make noise if the door is opened.
- *What if my child has a nightmare? Can’t she sleep in our bed?* No. Stick to the rules. Offer comfort in her room when she is in her bed.
- *What if our child is ill and feverish? I want her to be close to me.* She must sleep in her own bed. Check on her periodically if you like.
- *When my husband is away on business my child is scared, and I enjoy the comfort of my child in bed. Is this okay once in a while?* Letting your child sleep with you “once in a while” only reinforces the problem. Sticking to bedtime routines creates feelings of security. Teach your child to be secure and confident by helping him master his fears and showing him that you feel safe yourself.