



## Kris' Corner:

*A Series of Articles by Parenting Expert*

*Kris Imbrie*



## ***Helping Your Child Fall Asleep***

The school year is in full swing and hopefully most children have readjusted their schedules to accommodate the early start for the school day. Sometimes parents are concerned that inadequate sleep may impair their children's abilities in school, particularly if their child is having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

Frequently parents tell me that their child stalls going to bed or repeatedly complains that they are unable to sleep once they have been put to bed.

Sleep is a tricky thing. Let's face it, as adults we probably experience our own share of sleepless nights and groggy mornings. Learning how to relax ourselves in order to fall asleep is a skill. The more we worry about things, the more difficult it is to relax.

Sometimes, I think adults minimize or brush off the worries of a child. In comparison to our concerns, the issues faced by children can seem minor to an adult. After all, they're just kids!

However, because children are less able to protect themselves in the world, their problems are very significant to them. For example, parents are not present in the school classroom to explain to their child's teacher that reading aloud can be frightening. No one is on the playground to help children navigate the tricky social dynamics of immature egos or to help the bus driver understand that his yelling is terrifying.

I see many children in my private practice with anxiety issues. Many unexpected things can happen in a child's day. They may be mentally prepared for the usual demands of getting up, getting dressed, brushing their teeth, packing their backpack, remembering their homework, etc. But when they encounter a change in their usual routine, such as finding out that there is a substitute teacher or getting teased by a classmate, anxiety kicks in and their day is ruined.

Bedtime is often the place where all these negative feelings bubble to the surface. As adults, the same thing often happens to us. We lie in bed reviewing the complexities of the day while we're trying to make sense of it all. Compared with adults, children are less capable of making sense of their experiences. They sometimes need our help and understanding when sleep just won't come, along with some assistance in calming themselves down.

The first thing to remember is that calming down for sleep takes some time. Kids aren't going to go from "full speed" to dead sleep in minutes. Things that are very stimulating need to stop at least an hour or so before bedtime, including television, videos, and screen time. Playing an exciting video game right up to bedtime is going to prevent the child's autonomic nervous system from slowing down to the level of peace and calm that is required for sleep.

A child who is having a difficult time getting to sleep can be very frustrating for the parent. For myself, I recall that after about an hour of dealing with a child who could not settle into sleep, I often "lost it" and ended up threatening consequences or saying things that upset my child. Before we allow our anger to take over it is helpful to remind ourselves that expressing our annoyance will be counter-productive, since children are often unnerved when they realize that their parents are upset with them. Instead, try to recognize that children share our frustration: They want to be able to sleep almost as much as we want them to sleep.

So, let's think of some ways that we can help our children slow down, calm down and relax.

Quiet activities like reading, or doing a puzzle together with some peaceful music in the background will go a long way to setting an atmosphere for sleep. With multiple children we might tend to the youngest first as the older ones listen to their favorite music or a book on tape. But, if possible, each child needs to have our personal attention, even if it's just for 10 or 15 minutes.

We are our child's best regulator. Our attention and interest in their day's events can allow for residual feelings to come to the surface. Just having us listen to their worries as they express their feelings can eliminate the internal dysregulation that interferes with sleep. Therefore, just talking with your child while they are in their beds can help children feel connected and safe.

*Kris Imbrie began the first 15 years of her career as an Elementary School Teacher, then crossed over into the field of social work as the Child Advocate at a battered woman's shelter for 10 years. She has written two violence prevention curriculums which received state awards. She has been a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Sparta, NJ. since 2004. She specializes in trauma and about half of her clients are children.*

For more information, visit [www.healingforchange.com](http://www.healingforchange.com).

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