

# FAP Parent Tips

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## Bedtime Without Struggling



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“Zachary, time for bed.” “NO!” Two year old Zachary responds, running toward the playroom. Mother follows close behind, pleading, “It’s time for bed, honey. C’mon, now.”

“No, Mommy, no!” squeals Zachary as Mother swoops down to pick him up. Zachary’s body stiffens, his back arches, and he begins kicking his feet in order to free himself of her tightening grip. Wildly, Zachary kicks his Mother as he struggles to get loose.

“Stop it! You’re going to bed, NOW!” Mother declares, not to be outdone by her child’s resistant behavior. Zachary begins to cry loudly as Mother, somewhat beaten and greatly exasperated, pulls off his clothes for his impending bath. This emotional and physical power struggle continues through Zachary’s bath, pajamas, tooth brushing, and abruptly ends with a token kiss.

Exhausted and frustrated, Mother proceeds down the stairs hopeful for some solitude, only to hear, “Mommmmy, I want a drink. Me go potty!” Feeling guilty and yet, still angry, Mother hurriedly responds with the requested water and a brisk trip to the bathroom. Mother sets him on the bed and says evenly, “Don’t let me hear another word. Good night!” Mother stomps down the

stairs after slamming his door. Zachary is left huddled on his bed, crying into his pillow and Mother feels guilty and frustrated in front of the television.

Now, look at this same scene through the eyes of the child - in this case Zachary. We parents get accustomed to looking at this scene through our “adult eyes” and miss the opportunity to understand from our child’s perspective.

Imagine that you are in the middle of a good book and your spouse says, “It’s time for bed.” In spite of your response, “No, I’m not ready just yet,” you are helped unwillingly up the stairs, your clothes are removed and you are forced into taking a bath. Consider how you are feeling. Are you feeling disrespected, violated, angry, devalued or controlled? You may be thinking, “Yes, but a two-year-old doesn’t feel this way - it’s not the same, he’s not an adult, besides, I’m the parent.”

True, the child is not yet an adult. However he IS a person, has feelings and is at an important growth stage of wanting independence and experimenting with how to have his choices be known and honored. This is the beginning of his being an individual - he is establishing his separateness from his parents and is exploring his competence and capabilities.

Many times going to bed is not the issue, he may be tired and ready. Yet the command of being told what to do and when to do it brings up a feeling of being controlled. Isn’t it true that this is often our reaction as adults when we are “commanded” in the same way? The issue becomes one of wanting control over ourselves and what happens to us. In this scene with Zachary and Mother, Zachary does not feel understood and it causes the struggle to escalate. Also, as Mother continues to overpower Zachary, he feels unloved and rejected and Mother is left

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feeling pretty much the same way.

Bedtime can be a special time between children and parents as it is natural for us to desire closeness or connectedness before going to sleep. Often times, however, parents have over-burdened themselves during the day and so they are eager to get the child in bed as soon as possible so they can have some quiet time for themselves. This can cause the child to feel that his parents are trying to “get rid of him.” In our bedtime struggle story, Zachary’s desire for more closeness is expressed through wanting a drink and “going potty” which results in more tension between he and his mom and both feeling hurt and rejected.

So, consider these questions: What did Zachary want in our story? More importantly, what does your child want? To declare his independence or sense of self. To feel close or connected with his parent. To feel a sense of control over what happens to him. To feel respected and heard.

How can you, as a parent, give your child what he wants and needs and still have him go to bed in a timely manner?

Respect your needs. Take care of yourself during the day so you are not feeling hassled and frazzled at your child’s bedtime. Set your child’s bedtime at an hour that allows you some solitude and/or “couple time” with your partner after your child goes to bed.

Whenever possible, have both parents be a part of the bedtime ritual. Bedtime is more fun and less of a burden when both parents participate.

Start your bedtime ritual forty-five minutes to one hour before your child’s actual bedtime hour to avoid unnecessary stress and struggle. This process should be a winding down time, in other words, eliminate activities that would excite the child such as rough-housing or tickling.

Respect his sense of time by telling him that bedtime is in 15 minutes, allowing him to complete a particular activity before his actual bedtime hour.

Offer choices instead of orders. Your child will have a feeling of control over what happens to him when given choices. For example, you might say, “Do you want your dad to help you with your bath or me?” Or “Do you want to wear your red pajamas or your blue ones?” Or “Do you want to sleep with your gorilla or your kitty?”

Create a bedtime ritual with your child’s help and advice. For example, read a story, snuggle, give three stuffed animals to kiss, give a hug and two kisses and leave the room singing a song. Routine is particularly important

from at least 12 months of age through age two. The routine needs to have a quality of sameness or routine -- the same order or the same song -- to provide a sense of security.

Create closeness. For example: Talk about “Remember When,” such as “Remember when we went camping and that raccoon got into our food?” Or “I remember when you were a baby and loved to have your tummy rubbed.” Listen to your child’s feeling about the day. Say three things that you love about each other. Start each statement with, “What I love about you is...” and complete it with a specific thing that you love. For instance, “What I love about you is the way you helped put your books away today,” or “What I love about you is the way your singing can lift my spirits.”

Ask the following questions that allow your child to share more about himself: “What was the best thing that happened to you today?” “What was the worst thing that happened to you today?” “What was the silliest thing that happened to you today?”

Some children may talk more freely with the lights out. Try to discover what is most encouraging to your child in enhancing your communication together.

After you have completed your bedtime routine, leave your child’s room. Explain to your child ONCE when you start this new routine, “If you come out of the room for any reason other than emergency, I will lovingly guide or carry you back to your room.” “I will not talk to you after saying goodnight and closing the bedroom door.”

It is essential that you do not talk to your child after the bed time routine is complete. Your child will pay more attention to your actions than your words. Further, if you continue to talk to your child, you are more likely to get into a verbal power struggle about going to bed. If you discover yourself saying, “Didn’t you hear what I said? I told you to go to bed and I wasn’t going to talk anymore!” Stop talking and take loving action by guiding your child back to bed. You may have to guide your child back to his room several times, particularly at the beginning because children will test their parents. However, as the week progresses, bedtime will become more pleasant for both you and your child.

You can make bedtime a time of nurturing, closeness, shared communication and fun. By involving your children in the decision-making process and spending this special time with them, they will feel valued and respected. By setting limits, you will gain the respect of your children and build their self-esteem.