

July 01, 2008

Summer of Sleep



Once upon a time, my 3-year-old daughter, Jane, was an amazing sleeper. For more than two years, we'd kiss her goodnight, she'd fall asleep by herself, and we wouldn't hear from her until morning. However, a few months after she graduated to her big-girl bed, she decided she was afraid of the dark and didn't want to stay in her room alone (perfectly age appropriate, I know). She started screaming "I don't want to go to sleep!" or "I can't close my eyes!" REALLY LOUDLY. Despite my best intentions, I ended up lying down on her floor every night at bedtime (resting on her giant stuffed dog), and often for hours in the middle of the night because I didn't want her yells to wake her big sister in the next room. It became a big bad habit for both of us.

Now that my older daughter has left for sleep-away camp, I knew it was time to get serious about this situation. My initial plan was to gradually shorten the

length of time I spent in her room (and edge closer to the door), but the problem was that I was so tired that I kept falling asleep myself.

Last night, my husband had a sincere heart-to-heart with Jane. He told her that she really had to stay in her bed when she woke up during the night because Mommy gets really grumpy when doesn't get enough sleep. "Okay, Daddy," she said. Although bedtime was still an ordeal, when Jane came into our room in the middle of the night, we insisted that she go back to her own bed. And amazingly, she did.

This morning, I suddenly realized that I needed to use [Dr. Alan Kazdin's technique](#) for changing kids' bad behavior. I had heard Dr. Kazdin—director of Yale's Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic—speak about his research-backed method earlier this year, and decided that we should do an article about it in *Parents*. (It'll be in our August issue—stay tuned.) His basic premise: Praise—not consequences or time-outs—is what makes a child change her behavior. If you want your child to do something (play nicely, stay in her room at night) you need to give her over-the-top praise every time she does it—and also make a game out of “practicing” the good behavior so that it becomes ingrained. Every time your child does the right thing (for real, or as part of the game), she gets a sticker or point on a chart.

“WOW!!! You went back to sleep on your own last night and didn't need me to sit with you!!! That's so great!!!!” I told Jane, and gave her big hug. Then we went into the living room and I made a chart out of construction paper, and let her put a big star sticker on “Monday.” Then I said, “Do you want to play a game where you practice going to sleep on your own? I'll get in my bed, and you get in your bed, and you pretend to wake up and call me. If you can stay in your bed and pretend to go back to sleep, I'll give you another sticker!!!” We did it, and she was so excited. “I want to do it again and again and again!” she said. After a few more times, we pretended it was bedtime, and I read her a story and then she practiced staying in her room all by herself. We had to add a second sheet of paper so there was room for all the star stickers.



It's only day one, but I'm hoping that July will be a breakthrough month. (And since I keep hearing that a lack of sleep makes you gain weight, maybe I'll get skinny too.) I'll keep you posted.

July 09, 2008

Sleep Success



Last week, [I wrote about my high hopes](#) for a new plan to help my 3-year-old, Jane, fall and stay asleep on her own. I vowed not to spend another night asleep on her floor. Inspired by Dr. Alan Kazdin's new book, [The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child](#), I poured on the praise ("WOW!!! That's so great!! You fell back to sleep without me in the room!!!! I'm so proud of you!!!!") and gave her big hugs and put rainbow-colored star stickers (thanks, [Oriental Trading](#)) on her pink sleep chart. We played the "going to sleep game" where we pretended that she was falling asleep and I said goodnight and left the room, as well as the "going back to sleep game," where she pretended to wake up in the middle of the night and come into my bedroom and then go back to her room to sleep by herself. Every time that she pretended to do what I wanted her to do "in real life," she got the same mega-praise and a sticker (or three) on her chart. Amazingly, she totally jumped on the bandwagon. We only spent two days practicing, and she fell asleep solo all week. To celebrate, we went to Target and bought her a new princess nightgown. "I slept through the night!" she now says gleefully when she wakes up in the morning, "How did you sleep, Mommy?" So far, so good!