

Dr. Vera's
CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

stop the bedtime battles!

72
swaps:
instead of...
try this!

and help everyone sleep

A Step-by-Step Bedtime
Plan for Kids with Autism

DR. FERNANDO VERA, OT

DR. VERA'S CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

Stop the Bedtime Battles

A Step-by-Step Bedtime Plan for Kids with Autism

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StartEmpowering.com

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Important: This guide is for education and support. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or individualized therapy. Every child with autism is different. Talk with your child's doctor about snoring, pauses in breathing, pain, seizures or any sudden change in sleep, and before starting or changing melatonin or any other sleep aid or medication. If anyone is in danger, call 911.

A note on language: this guide uses person-first language, such as "child with autism" and "child on the spectrum."

A LETTER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You are not failing at bedtime.

If you picked up this guide, bedtime at your house probably takes hours, ends in tears, or starts all over again at 2 a.m. You are exhausted, and so is your child.

As an occupational therapist, I hear this from families every week. Here is what I want you to know first: **sleep problems are very common in children with autism**, and they are not caused by lazy parenting or a stubborn child. Many of these children have a body clock that runs late, senses that stay switched on, and a brain that has trouble shifting from “go” to “rest.”

That changes what helps. Threats, long talks and giving up at 11 p.m. don't teach a body how to fall asleep. What helps is **a predictable routine, a bedroom that fits your child's senses, and the same calm response every night.**

Sleep is a skill, and skills are learned in small steps. This guide gives you the steps, the words and the tools.

How to use this guide

Tonight

Find your biggest problem in the contents. Read the “Instead of... Try this” swaps on the left page. Each takes about 30 seconds.

This week

Read the right page: what to say, what to do, what to avoid and how to set up for the next night.

Get to know your child

Fill in the sleep profile and the two-week sleep diary. They turn guessing into a plan.

Share it

The “My Sleep Plan” page is made to hand to a partner, grandparents and sitters so everyone does bedtime the same way.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Change one thing at a time and give it two weeks. Sleep usually gets a little worse before it gets better. That is normal, not failure.

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START HERE

Which sleep problem is it?

Most sleep struggles fall into three groups. Many children have more than one, but start with the one that costs your family the most sleep.

	BEDTIME BATTLES	CAN'T FALL ASLEEP	NIGHT AND EARLY WAKING
What it looks like	Stalling, running off, crying, “one more,” leaving the room again and again	In bed and willing, but awake for an hour or more: tossing, talking, humming	Awake at 2 a.m., coming to your bed, up for the day at 4 or 5 a.m.
Often behind it	Hard transitions, no clear routine, bedtime set too early, fear of being alone	A late body clock, a busy brain, sensory discomfort, too much light or screen time	Needing you to fall back asleep, a room that changes overnight, hunger, pain or snoring
What helps most	A short visual routine, clear limits and the same calm return to bed	A later bedtime that moves earlier slowly, a dark, comfy room and a wind-down hour	Falling asleep at bedtime the same way they'll need to at 2 a.m., and boring nights
Find it in	Part one	Part two	Part three

Rule out a medical cause first

Snoring, mouth breathing, reflux, constipation, itchy skin, restless legs and seizures all disturb sleep. Tell your child's doctor what you see before you start a new plan.

How much sleep is enough?

Most preschoolers need about 10 to 13 hours in 24 hours, school-age children about 9 to 12, and teens about 8 to 10. Your child's mood and energy in the daytime are the best guide.

START HERE

The bedtime runway

A good night starts long before lights out. Think of the day as a runway with four parts. Each part has one job.

day

DAYTIME

1 • Fuel the day

What happens in the daytime sets the body clock for the night.

- Morning daylight
- Lots of movement
- Same wake-up time

dim

EVENING

2 • Dim down

The last hour tells the brain that sleep is coming.

- Screens off
- Lights low
- Calm, heavy play

steps

BEDTIME

3 • Same steps

A short routine in the same order, ending in the bedroom.

- 4 to 6 steps
- Picture chart
- 20 to 30 minutes

night

OVERNIGHT

4 • Boring nights

Night wakings get the same calm, quiet, brief answer.

- Few words
- Lights stay low
- Back to own bed

DR. VERA'S TIP

If bedtime is a mess, start with the morning. A steady wake-up time, even on weekends, is the strongest tool you have for setting the body clock.

START HERE

The D.O.Z.E. method

One simple plan behind every page in this guide. When you're not sure what to do, come back to these four letters.



Daytime sets up the night

Wake up at the same time every day. Get daylight and movement in the morning. Keep naps early and short. Skip caffeine, including soda and chocolate, after lunch.



One routine, same order

Pick four to six calming steps and do them in the same order every night, with pictures. The last steps happen in the bedroom, and the routine always ends the same way.



Zone: a bedroom built for sleep

Dark, cool, quiet and comfortable for your child's senses. The room should look and sound the same at 2 a.m. as it did at bedtime.



Exit plan

Decide how you will leave the room and what you will do when your child gets up. Then do the same thing every time, calmly, with very few words.

What NOT to do at bedtime

- ✗ Use the bed or bedroom for time-outs
- ✗ Start a brand-new plan on a bad night
- ✗ Change everything at once

Remember

Your child is not giving you a hard time; their body is having a hard time. Consistency for two weeks beats the perfect plan for two nights.

PRINTABLE

My child's sleep profile

Check how often you see each one. Bring this page to your child's doctor or OT. The patterns point to where to start.

MY CHILD...	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
Takes more than 30 minutes to fall asleep	☐	☐	☐
Needs an adult in the room to fall asleep	☐	☐	☐
Leaves the bed or bedroom after lights out	☐	☐	☐
Wakes during the night and needs help to resettle	☐	☐	☐
Is awake for an hour or more in the middle of the night	☐	☐	☐
Wakes for the day before 5:30 a.m.	☐	☐	☐
Snores, gasps or breathes through the mouth in sleep	☐	☐	☐
Kicks, rocks or is very restless in bed	☐	☐	☐
Complains about pajamas, sheets, light or noise	☐	☐	☐
Uses a screen in the hour before bed	☐	☐	☐
Is sleepy, cranky or extra active in the daytime	☐	☐	☐
Sleeps much better or worse in some places	☐	☐	☐

The three things that help my child settle are:

part one

Getting to Bed

Winding down, turning off screens and the long walk to the bedroom. How to make the last hour of the day calm and predictable.

- | | | | |
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| 1 | Winding Down After a Busy Day | 2 | Turning Off Screens Before Bed |
| 3 | Bath, Teeth and Pajamas | 4 | “One More” and Stalling |
| 5 | Getting Out of Bed Again and Again | 6 | Bedtime That's Too Early or Too Late |

1

PART ONE · GETTING TO BED

Winding Down After a Busy Day

What it looks like

It's almost bedtime and your child is running laps, jumping on the couch or laughing wildly. The more tired they get, the faster they go.

What's really going on

An overtired body makes stress hormones that look like extra energy. Many children with autism can't feel "tired" building, so they need the room and the routine to slow down for them.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Calm down! It's almost bedtime."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Body needs a big squeeze. Then quiet time."

Why it works: "Calm down" is not a skill. Deep pressure gives the body a clear way to slow down.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep bright lights and the TV on until bedtime.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Dim the lights and turn off screens one hour before bed.

Why it works: Low light helps the brain release its own sleep signal.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Chase your child around the house to catch them.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Give a heavy job: push the laundry basket, carry books to the bedroom.

Why it works: Heavy work for muscles and joints settles the nervous system better than sitting still.

More things to say

“Lights are getting sleepy. So are we.”

“Ten wall push-ups, then pajamas.”

“Quiet voices now. Slow feet.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Lower the lights and your own voice at the same time every evening.
- ✓ Offer heavy work: wall pushes, a bear hug, carrying something heavy.
- ✓ Move rough play and tickling to earlier in the day.
- ✓ Put on the same quiet music or white noise every night as a signal.

Avoid

- ✗ Rough play or chasing games in the last hour.
- ✗ Trying to make an excited child lie still.
- ✗ Saying “you’re overtired” as a scolding.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Build movement into the afternoon: park, trampoline, bike, swimming.
- ✓ Start the wind-down hour at the same time each night, with a timer or a song.
- ✓ Keep a “quiet box” for evenings only: puzzles, books, coloring, play dough.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is very active every evening and also sleeps less than peers, ask the doctor about sleep, iron levels and the timing of any medications.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Think “heavy, slow, low.” Heavy work, slow rocking and low lights tell the body it is safe to power down.

2

PART ONE · GETTING TO BED

Turning Off Screens Before Bed

What it looks like

The tablet is the only thing that keeps your child calm at night. When you take it away, the screaming starts, so it stays on later and later.

What's really going on

Screens are exciting to the brain, and the light can push the body clock later. For many children the screen has also become the only way they know to settle.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let the tablet go to bed with your child.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Park the tablet on a charger outside the bedroom one hour before bed.

Why it works: A fixed “bedtime” for the device makes the rule about the routine, not about you.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“That’s it, no more tablet. Give it to me.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Two more minutes. Then the tablet goes to sleep, and we read.”

Why it works: A warning plus what comes next makes the ending easier to accept.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Take the screen away and offer nothing in its place.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Swap in a calm replacement: audio story, picture book or quiet music.

Why it works: Your child still needs a way to settle. Give a new one before removing the old one.

More things to say

“Tablet is charging. It sleeps in the kitchen.”

“First goodnight tablet, then your story.”

“You can listen to your story in bed.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Give warnings at 10, 5 and 1 minute with a visual timer.
- ✓ Let your child plug the tablet in and say goodnight to it.
- ✓ Start the next step right away, like bath or snack.
- ✓ Stay calm and keep going with the routine if there are tears.

Avoid

- ✗ Using the screen to end every bedtime protest.
- ✗ TV or tablets in the bedroom overnight.
- ✗ Exciting shows or games in the evening.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Move screen time earlier and end it at the same time each night.
- ✓ If an hour is too big a change, start with 15 minutes and add more each week.
- ✓ Use night mode and low brightness in the evening.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't fall asleep at all without a screen, ask your OT for other calming tools you can build up first.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Audio is your friend. A story or soft music with the screen face down gives comfort without the light.

3

PART ONE · GETTING TO BED

Bath, Teeth and Pajamas

What it looks like

Every step is a fight: your child runs from the bath, clamps their mouth shut for teeth, or cries when the pajamas go on. By bedtime everyone is upset.

What's really going on

Water, toothpaste and fabric can feel too strong for a sensitive child. A routine that upsets the senses wakes the body up at the very time it needs to slow down.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Rush through bath, teeth and pajamas in any order.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a picture chart with the same four to six steps every night.

Why it works: When your child can see what is next, there is less to argue about.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Force the bath right before bed if it always ends in tears.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Move the bath to earlier in the day or do a quick warm wash instead.

Why it works: The routine should calm. Any step that upsets your child can be moved or changed.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Hurry up and get your pajamas on!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Dinosaur pajamas or the soft blue ones?"

Why it works: A small choice gives your child some control and keeps things moving.

More things to say

“Check the chart. What's next?”

“Teeth, then two books.”

“You pick the pajamas tonight.”

Do this in the moment

-  Let your child move a picture or check off each step.
-  Use soft, tag-free pajamas your child already likes.
-  Try an unflavored or mild toothpaste and a soft brush.
-  Warm the towel and the bathroom before the bath.

Avoid

-  Adding new steps when your child is already upset.
-  Scratchy or brand-new pajamas at bedtime.
-  Taking away the story as a punishment.

Set up for next time

-  Put the hardest step first, when your child has the most energy.
-  Practice tooth brushing at a calm time of day.
-  Keep the whole routine to 20 or 30 minutes.



GET MORE HELP IF

If washing, brushing or dressing cause strong distress most days, ask an OT about a sensory plan for daily care.

DR. VERA'S TIP

End the routine with the step your child likes best. People walk faster toward something good.

4

PART ONE · GETTING TO BED

“One More” and Stalling

What it looks like

One more book. One more drink. One more hug, a different blanket, a question about tomorrow. Bedtime stretches an hour past lights out.

What's really going on

Stalling is often about connection, worry about being alone, or a bedtime that is too early for your child's body clock. If it works, it keeps going.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“No! I said that was the last one.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Two books tonight. You choose which two.”

Why it works: Setting the number before you start avoids bargaining at the end.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Answer every request after lights out.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give one bedtime pass: one extra hug or drink, then it's used up.

Why it works: A pass makes the limit clear and gives your child a fair way to ask.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Run back for water, the toilet and a tissue one at a time.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Add “last drink, last toilet, last hug” to the routine chart.

Why it works: When every need has its turn, there are fewer reasons to call out.

More things to say

“You used your pass. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“That’s a good question for breakfast.”

“I love you. It’s sleeping time.”

Do this in the moment

-  State the plan before you start: how many books, songs and hugs.
-  Keep your answers short, kind and the same each time.
-  Praise staying in bed the next morning.
-  If your child lies awake for a long time, try a later bedtime.

Avoid

-  Giving in after the tenth request.
-  Long talks or new topics after lights out.
-  Getting angry, which gives the stalling more attention.

Set up for next time

-  Make a “worry time” after dinner to talk about tomorrow.
-  Build ten minutes of one-on-one time into the routine.
-  Trade an unused bedtime pass for a small reward in the morning.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child seems truly scared or panics when you leave, talk with the doctor or a psychologist about anxiety.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Fill the cup before bed. Ten minutes of your full attention earlier in the evening saves forty minutes of “one more.”

5

PART ONE · GETTING TO BED

Getting Out of Bed Again and Again

What it looks like

You say goodnight, and two minutes later your child is in the hallway. You walk them back. They come out again. And again.

What's really going on

Getting up brings attention, company and sometimes a snack or a screen. Your child may also not know what “stay in bed” means or how long the night is.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Talk, scold or bargain each time your child comes out.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Walk them back quietly with the same few words every time.

Why it works: A boring, repeated response takes away the reward for getting up.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“If you get up again, no park tomorrow!”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“It's sleeping time. Back to bed.”

Why it works: Threats about tomorrow don't work at night. A calm script does.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to know when morning is.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a color clock: red means stay in bed, green means okay to get up.

Why it works: A light makes an invisible rule something your child can see.

More things to say

“Back to bed. I’ll check on you.”

“The light is red. Still sleeping time.”

“You stayed in bed! Sticker time.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Return your child to bed right away, every time.
- ✓ Keep the lights off and your voice flat and kind.
- ✓ Check on your child briefly while they are still in bed.
- ✓ Praise and reward mornings after staying in bed.

Avoid

- ✗ Letting your child stay up “just this once.”
- ✗ Chasing, which turns it into a game.
- ✗ Locking your child in the bedroom.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Start a sticker chart for staying in bed, with a small reward the next morning.
- ✓ Promise a check-in: “I’ll come back in two minutes,” and do it.
- ✓ Use a safety gate at the door if your child wanders and safety is a concern.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child leaves the house or does unsafe things at night, talk with the doctor and an OT about a safety plan right away.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The first three nights are the hardest. You may walk them back twenty times. By the end of the week, most families count on one hand.

6

PART ONE · GETTING TO BED

Bedtime That's Too Early or Too Late

What it looks like

Your child goes to bed at 7:30 but doesn't fall asleep until 10. Or bedtime drifts to midnight, and mornings are a fight.

What's really going on

Many children with autism have a body clock that runs late. Time awake in bed teaches the brain that bed is for being awake.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put your child to bed hours before they can fall asleep.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Set bedtime close to when they fall asleep now, then move it 15 minutes earlier every few nights.

Why it works: Falling asleep quickly rebuilds the link between bed and sleep.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child sleep late to make up for a bad night.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Wake your child at the same time every morning.

Why it works: A steady wake-up time is what resets the body clock.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just lie there until you fall asleep."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You can look at books in bed until you feel sleepy."

Why it works: A quiet activity in dim light avoids a battle while sleepiness builds.

More things to say

“Good morning! Curtains open.”

“Bedtime is when the clock says 9.”

“Tomorrow we try a little earlier.”

Do this in the moment

-  Write down when your child really falls asleep for one week.
-  Open the curtains or go outside soon after waking.
-  Keep the bedtime routine the same, just at the new time.
-  Move bedtime earlier in small steps only after sleep comes quickly.

Avoid

-  Long or late-afternoon naps.
-  Changing bedtime by an hour at once.
-  Sleeping in more than an hour on weekends.

Set up for next time

-  Eat meals and have active play at regular times each day.
-  Dim the house lights in the evening and get bright light in the morning.
-  Use the sleep diary at the back of this guide to see the pattern.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child still can't fall asleep before late night after several weeks, ask the doctor about a delayed body clock and whether melatonin is right for your child.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Bedtime is not when you put them in bed. It's when their body is ready. Find that time first, then nudge it earlier.

part two

Falling Asleep

In bed but wide awake. How to help a body and a busy brain let go, without you lying there for two hours.

7 Needs You There to Fall Asleep

9 A Busy Brain That Won't Switch Off

11 Light and Noise in the Bedroom

8 Afraid of the Dark or Being Alone

10 Uncomfortable Pajamas, Sheets and Blankets

12 Lying Awake for an Hour or More

7

PART TWO · FALLING ASLEEP

Needs You There to Fall Asleep

What it looks like

Your child only falls asleep if you lie beside them, hold their hand or rub their back. If you try to leave, they sit straight up.

What's really going on

Your child has learned to fall asleep with you as part of the picture. When they wake in the night and you're gone, they need you back to do it again.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Sneak out once your child is asleep.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Say goodnight and leave while your child is drowsy but still awake.

Why it works: Waking up to find you gone is scary. Falling asleep knowing you left is not.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Go from lying in the bed to the door closed in one night.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Move in steps: in the bed, sitting on the bed, a chair, the doorway, the hall.

Why it works: Small steps let your child build the skill without panic.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're a big kid. You don't need me."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"I'm going to sit in my chair. I'm staying close."

Why it works: Your child hears safety, not shame, and still practices settling.

More things to say

"I'll check on you in two minutes."

"Bunny will keep you company."

"You fell asleep in your own bed. You did it!"

Do this in the moment

-  Stay at each step for three or four nights before moving on.
-  Sit quietly: no talking, no eye contact, no phone light.
-  Offer a comfort item that smells like you, such as your pillowcase.
-  Come back for short check-ins when you say you will.

Avoid

-  Going back a step because of one hard night.
-  Getting into the bed "just until they settle."
-  Starting during illness, travel or a big change.

Set up for next time

-  Tell your child the plan in the daytime, with pictures or a short story.
-  Give lots of cuddles in the routine before lights out.
-  Do the same steps for night wakings as at bedtime.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child panics, vomits or stays upset for more than a few nights at one step, slow down and ask a psychologist or OT to help you adjust the plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The chair is not a punishment for you. Bring a pillow. Every night in that chair is an investment in sleeping in your own bed.

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PART TWO · FALLING ASLEEP

Afraid of the Dark or Being Alone

What it looks like

Your child cries when the light goes off, asks you to check the closet, or says there are monsters. They want the big light on all night.

What's really going on

Fears are real to your child, and a strong imagination or literal thinking can make shadows and sounds feel dangerous. Being alone is the hardest part.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"There's nothing there. Don't be silly."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"The dark feels scary. You're safe, and I'm close by."

Why it works: Naming the feeling calms more than arguing about whether it makes sense.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave the bright ceiling light on all night.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Use a dim red or amber night light near the floor.

Why it works: Warm, low light comforts without telling the brain it's daytime.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Check for monsters or use "monster spray."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Tour the room together in the daytime and name each shadow and sound.

Why it works: Hunting for monsters suggests they could be there. Explaining the room removes the mystery.

More things to say

“That sound is the heater. It keeps us warm.”

“Your light stays on all night.”

“I’m in the kitchen. I can hear you.”

Do this in the moment

-  Listen to the fear once, calmly, then move on with the routine.
-  Give your child a small flashlight they control.
-  Leave the door open a set amount and keep it the same.
-  Check in after a few minutes, as promised.

Avoid

-  Scary shows, games or news, even in the daytime.
-  Teasing or telling siblings about the fear.
-  Long talks about the fear at bedtime.

Set up for next time

-  Play in the dim bedroom in the daytime: flashlight games, a blanket fort.
-  Read a picture book about a character who feels brave at night.
-  Draw the worry in the daytime and make a plan together.



GET MORE HELP IF

If fears are getting stronger, happen in the daytime too, or keep your child from sleeping for weeks, talk with the doctor or a psychologist.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give your child a job at night. “You’re in charge of the flashlight” turns a frightened child into a capable one.

9

PART TWO · FALLING ASLEEP

A Busy Brain That Won't Switch Off

What it looks like

Your child lies in bed talking, singing, asking questions or replaying lines from a show. Their body is still, but their mind is going full speed.

What's really going on

Many children with autism process the day at night. Worries, excitement and favorite topics get louder when everything else gets quiet.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop talking and go to sleep!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Your brain is busy. Let's give it one quiet job."

Why it works: You can't order a mind to stop. You can give it something slow to do.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Answer question after question at bedtime.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Hold a ten-minute "talk time" earlier in the evening.

Why it works: Thoughts that have had their turn are quieter at night.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Lie in silence hoping they'll drift off.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Play a calm audio story or soft, steady music at low volume.

Why it works: Gentle sound gives the mind one thing to follow instead of twenty.

More things to say

“Tell your bear. He'll remember it for morning.”

“Breathe in like smelling a flower. Out like blowing a candle.”

“We'll talk about trains at breakfast.”

Do this in the moment

-  Try slow belly breathing together with a stuffed animal on the tummy.
-  Squeeze and relax hands, arms and legs, one at a time.
-  Keep a notebook by the bed to “park” thoughts for tomorrow.
-  Accept quiet humming or self-talk if your child stays in bed.

Avoid

-  Exciting topics or big news at bedtime.
-  Getting drawn into long conversations.
-  Telling your child to “just stop thinking.”

Set up for next time

-  Show tomorrow's plan on a picture schedule before bed.
-  Practice breathing or muscle squeezes in the daytime first.
-  Limit favorite-topic videos in the last hour.



GET MORE HELP IF

If worries or racing thoughts keep your child awake most nights, ask the doctor about anxiety and who can help.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Quiet talking to themselves is not misbehavior. For many children it is how the brain winds down. If they're in bed and calm, let it be.

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PART TWO · FALLING ASLEEP

Uncomfortable Pajamas, Sheets and Blankets

What it looks like

Your child kicks off the covers, strips off pajamas, complains the sheets are scratchy or wants to be wrapped up tight like a burrito.

What's really going on

Touch can feel stronger for children with autism. Seams, tags, wrinkles or the wrong weight of blanket can keep the body on alert all night.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Those pajamas are fine. Leave them on."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Show me which part bothers you."

Why it works: Believing your child lets you find and fix the real problem.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Buy new bedding and expect your child to get used to it.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Let your child feel and choose fabrics, and wash new ones several times first.

Why it works: Soft, familiar fabric with their own smell is easier to accept.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Tuck your child in tightly and leave.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask what feels good: heavy or light, tucked or loose.

Why it works: Some children crave pressure and others feel trapped. Only they can tell you.

More things to say

“Tags are gone. Feel how soft.”

“Tight like a burrito or loose like a cloud?”

“You can sleep in your soft shirt.”

Do this in the moment

-  Cut out tags and turn pajamas inside out if seams bother your child.
-  Try snug-fitting sleepwear for a child who likes pressure.
-  Smooth the sheets before your child gets in.
-  Offer firm, slow back rubs instead of light strokes.

Avoid

-  Insisting on matching pajama sets.
-  Changing the laundry soap without warning.
-  Light, tickly touch at bedtime.

Set up for next time

-  Buy several of the pajamas and sheets that work.
-  Try a sleeping bag or a stretchy sheet for a child who seeks pressure.
-  Ask an OT before using a weighted blanket.



GET MORE HELP IF

Weighted blankets are not safe for every child. Ask your OT about the right weight, and only use one if your child can take it off alone. Never use one with a baby or toddler.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Comfort beats cute. If your child sleeps best in an old t-shirt and underwear, that is a perfectly good pair of pajamas.

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PART TWO · FALLING ASLEEP

Light and Noise in the Bedroom

What it looks like

A car door, a dog barking or the hallway light under the door, and your child is wide awake. In summer they won't sleep until it's dark outside.

What's really going on

Senses that are extra sharp in the daytime stay sharp at night. Small sounds and thin lines of light are enough to keep the brain on watch.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hope the neighborhood stays quiet.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Run a fan or white noise machine all night at a low, steady volume.

Why it works: A constant sound covers sudden ones that would wake your child.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Rely on thin curtains in the summer.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Hang blackout curtains or shades and cover small lights on devices.

Why it works: Darkness is the body's signal to make its own sleep hormone.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a noise. Ignore it."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That was the garbage truck. All done. Back to sleep."

Why it works: Naming the sound tells the brain it is safe to stop listening.

More things to say

“The fan is singing its sleepy song.”

“Curtains closed. Night is here.”

“Our house makes quiet night sounds.”

Do this in the moment

-  Lie in your child's bed at night to see and hear what they do.
-  Keep the room cool; a slightly cool room helps sleep.
-  Turn on the white noise as part of the routine.
-  Keep the rest of the house quiet for the first hour.

Avoid

-  Music or stories that turn off in the night.
-  A TV on in the next room.
-  Bright hallway lights after bedtime.

Set up for next time

-  Move the bed away from the window or a shared wall.
-  Put a rolled towel or draft blocker at the bottom of the door.
-  Keep the same sound and light every night, including on trips.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is extremely sensitive to sound in the daytime too, ask the doctor about a hearing check and an OT about a sensory plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Whatever is on at bedtime should still be on at 3 a.m. A sound that stops in the night can wake a light sleeper.

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PART TWO · FALLING ASLEEP

Lying Awake for an Hour or More

What it looks like

Your child follows the routine and stays in bed, but tosses, turns, hums and sighs for one or two hours before sleep finally comes.

What's really going on

The body clock may be set late, or the bed has become a place for being awake. Naps, screens, caffeine and too little movement can all add up.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep the same early bedtime and hope it gets better.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Move bedtime later for now, then earlier by 15 minutes every few nights.

Why it works: Less awake time in bed makes the bed a signal for sleep again.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child play, eat and watch shows on the bed in the daytime.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Keep the bed for sleep and bedtime stories only.

Why it works: The brain learns what a place is for by what happens there.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Close your eyes! You have school tomorrow."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You don't have to sleep. Just rest your body."

Why it works: Pressure to sleep keeps children awake. Permission to rest lets sleep come.

More things to say

“Resting is enough.”

“Let's do our squeezes: toes, legs, tummy, hands.”

“Sleep will come when it's ready.”

Do this in the moment

-  Check for caffeine in soda, tea and chocolate after lunch.
-  Get outside in the morning for bright light and movement.
-  Offer a small, plain snack before the routine if dinner was early.
-  After 30 minutes awake, allow a quiet book with a dim light.

Avoid

-  Naps after mid-afternoon for children who no longer need them.
-  Checking the clock or sighing in front of your child.
-  Hard exercise or exciting play right before bed.

Set up for next time

-  Track bedtime, sleep time and wake time for two weeks.
-  Keep the wake-up time steady seven days a week.
-  Ask the doctor to review any medications that might affect sleep.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child takes more than an hour to fall asleep most nights for a month, see the doctor. Ask about a late body clock, restless legs and low iron.

DR. VERA'S TIP

You can't make a child sleep. You can only make sleep likely. Set the stage, then let go of the result.

part three

Staying Asleep

Night wakings, visitors in your bed and the 4 a.m. start. How to keep nights boring so everyone gets back to sleep.

13 Waking and Calling Out at Night

15 Awake for Hours in the Night

17 Leaving the Room or Wandering at Night

14 Coming Into Your Bed

16 Nightmares and Night Terrors

18 Up for the Day at 4 or 5 a.m.

13

PART THREE · STAYING ASLEEP

Waking and Calling Out at Night

What it looks like

Your child falls asleep fine but wakes once, twice or five times a night, crying or calling for you until you come.

What's really going on

Everyone wakes briefly between sleep cycles. A child who needs you, a bottle or a screen to fall asleep at bedtime needs the same thing at 2 a.m.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Bring a drink, turn on a show or start a chat at 2 a.m.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Keep it short and dull: lights off, few words, back to bed.

Why it works: A boring night gives the brain no reason to wake up for more.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Rush in at the first sound.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Wait a minute or two to see if your child resettles alone.

Why it works: Many wakings end on their own if nothing exciting happens.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"What's wrong? Why are you up? Are you hungry?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's still night. I love you. Back to sleep."

Why it works: Questions wake the thinking brain. One calm line keeps it sleepy.

More things to say

“Shh. Sleeping time.”

“You're safe. Goodnight.”

“See you when the light is green.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Check quickly for a real need: illness, wet bed, too hot or cold.
- ✓ Use the same words and the same steps every time.
- ✓ Keep the room dark; use a dim red light if you need to see.
- ✓ Leave while your child is calm but still awake.

Avoid

- ✗ Food, screens or play in the night.
- ✗ Turning on bright lights.
- ✗ A different response each night.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Help your child learn to fall asleep alone at bedtime first.
- ✓ Make sure the room is the same at 2 a.m. as at bedtime.
- ✓ Note wake times in the sleep diary to find a pattern.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child wakes screaming and can't be comforted, snores or gasps, or seems to be in pain at night, see the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Fix bedtime first. When a child learns to fall asleep on their own at 8 p.m., many of the 2 a.m. wakings fade without any extra work.

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PART THREE · STAYING ASLEEP

Coming Into Your Bed

What it looks like

At some point every night, small feet come down the hall. You wake up at dawn with a child sideways across your pillow.

What's really going on

Your bed is warm, safe and has you in it. If climbing in works some nights, your child will keep trying every night.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child stay because you're too tired to move.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Walk them back to their own bed every time, calmly and quietly.

Why it works: The same answer every night teaches faster than any explanation.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Fine, get in. But just for tonight."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"You sleep in your bed. I'll tuck you in again."

Why it works: "Just tonight" teaches your child to keep asking.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Go from co-sleeping to sleeping alone in one night.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Put a mattress on your floor for a week, then move it toward their room.

Why it works: A middle step keeps your child close while they learn to sleep apart.

More things to say

“This is Mom and Dad's bed. Yours is waiting.”

“I'll walk you back and tuck you in.”

“You stayed in your bed all night!”

Do this in the moment

-  Decide on the plan with your partner before bedtime.
-  Tuck your child in again with a brief hug.
-  Hang a bell on your door so you wake when they come in.
-  Celebrate each morning they wake in their own bed.

Avoid

-  Making the walk back fun or chatty.
-  Shaming your child for wanting to be close.
-  Switching the rules on weekends.

Set up for next time

-  Add extra cuddle time to the bedtime routine.
-  Make their bed inviting: favorite blanket, a photo of you, a night light.
-  Invite them into your bed for a morning cuddle once the clock turns green.



GET MORE HELP IF

If co-sleeping works for your family and everyone sleeps well, it isn't a problem to fix. Ask for help if anyone is not sleeping or not safe.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Offer closeness in the morning, not the middle of the night. “When your clock is green, come snuggle” gives your child something to look forward to.

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PART THREE · STAYING ASLEEP

Awake for Hours in the Night

What it looks like

At 2 a.m. your child is wide awake: playing, laughing, jumping or wanting breakfast. It can last two or three hours before they sleep again.

What's really going on

Long night wakings are common in autism. The body clock may be off, or your child may be spending more hours in bed than they can sleep.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Turn on the lights or a show to pass the time.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Keep the room dark and allow only quiet rest or soft toys in bed.

Why it works: Light and fun teach the brain that 2 a.m. is a good time to be up.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child sleep late or nap long the next day.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Wake them at the usual time and keep naps short.

Why it works: Protecting the morning builds sleep pressure for the next night.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Go to sleep right now!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's night. You can rest quietly in bed."

Why it works: You can't force sleep, but you can require quiet rest.

More things to say

“Everyone is sleeping. Quiet time.”

“You can hold your bear and rest.”

“When the light is green, we play.”

Do this in the moment

-  Make sure your child is safe, then keep your visit very short.
-  Remove noisy or light-up toys from the bed and room.
-  Stay boring: no talking, no snacks, no screens.
-  Try a slightly later bedtime for two weeks.

Avoid

-  Getting up and starting the day at 3 a.m.
-  Giving a tablet to keep them quiet.
-  Extra sleep-ins that make the next night worse.

Set up for next time

-  Add up the hours your child truly sleeps and match time in bed to that.
-  Increase daylight and exercise during the day.
-  Make the room safe so quiet awake time is not a danger.



GET MORE HELP IF

If long night wakings happen several times a week for a month, see the doctor. Ask about reflux, pain, seizures and breathing problems during sleep.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Your goal at 2 a.m. is not sleep. It's safe, dark and boring. Sleep comes back faster when nothing interesting is happening.

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PART THREE · STAYING ASLEEP

Nightmares and Night Terrors

What it looks like

Your child wakes crying from a bad dream. Or they sit up screaming with eyes open, don't know you, and remember nothing the next day.

What's really going on

A nightmare is a scary dream; your child wakes and needs comfort. A night terror is a partial waking from deep sleep; your child is not really awake at all.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Shake or wake a child in a night terror.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Stay close, keep them safe and wait quietly until it passes.

Why it works: Waking them can make it longer and more confusing. It ends on its own.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It was just a dream. Go back to sleep."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That was scary. You're safe. I'm here."

Why it works: After a nightmare, comfort first helps the body calm enough to sleep.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Talk through the dream in detail at 3 a.m.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give a hug and a sip of water, then save the talk for daytime.

Why it works: Reliving the dream at night keeps the fear awake.

More things to say

“You're in your bed. You're safe.”

“The dream is all gone.”

“We can draw it tomorrow and change the ending.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ For a night terror: watch for safety and don't hold your child down.
- ✓ For a nightmare: comfort briefly and stay until they are calm.
- ✓ Keep a night light on so the room looks familiar.
- ✓ Keep bedtime regular; being overtired makes both worse.

Avoid

- ✗ Asking about a night terror the next day.
- ✗ Scary videos, even ones meant for children.
- ✗ Letting your child get very overtired.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Write down the time of night terrors; they often come at the same time.
- ✓ Add 20 to 30 minutes of sleep with an earlier bedtime.
- ✓ In the daytime, draw the nightmare with a new, funny ending.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor if night terrors happen often, include stiffening or jerking, cause injuries, or if your child is very sleepy in the daytime.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Here is how to tell them apart: after a nightmare your child wants you. In a night terror, they don't know you're there.

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PART THREE · STAYING ASLEEP

Leaving the Room or Wandering at Night

What it looks like

You find your child in the kitchen at 3 a.m., playing in the living room, or trying the front door while everyone else is asleep.

What's really going on

A child who wakes at night may go looking for food, a favorite thing or something to do. Many children with autism don't sense danger the way others do.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Count on waking up when your child gets up.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Put a chime or alarm on the bedroom door and outside doors.

Why it works: You can't keep a child safe if you don't know they're up.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave the house as it is in the daytime.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Lock up medicines, knives, cleaners and car keys, and secure windows.

Why it works: A safe house means a night waking is a nuisance, not an emergency.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"What are you doing out of bed?!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's night. Let's go back to your room."

Why it works: A calm return keeps the night boring and avoids a chase.

More things to say

“Nighttime is for your room.”

“If you need me, ring your bell.”

“We open the door when it's morning.”

Do this in the moment

-  Walk your child back calmly with few words.
-  Check that doors and windows are locked before you go to bed.
-  Give your child a way to call you: a bell or a monitor.
-  Put a stop-sign picture on outside doors.

Avoid

-  Locks your child couldn't escape in a fire.
-  Leaving screens or snacks where they can be found.
-  Assuming it won't happen again.

Set up for next time

-  Tell trusted neighbors and ask them to call you if they see your child out.
-  Ask about an ID bracelet or a GPS tracker.
-  Teach and practice the rule in the daytime: “At night I stay in my room.”



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child has left the house or tried to, call the doctor now and ask for a safety plan. If your child is missing, call 911 right away and check any nearby water first.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Alarms are for you, not against your child. A simple door chime lets the whole family sleep without one ear open.

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PART THREE · STAYING ASLEEP

Up for the Day at 4 or 5 a.m.

What it looks like

Your child is wide awake and ready to play long before sunrise. Nothing gets them back to sleep, and the whole house is up.

What's really going on

Early waking can come from a bedtime that's too early, light or noise at dawn, hunger, or a reward waiting at wake-up, like a show or breakfast.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Turn on cartoons at 4:30 so you can rest.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Treat it like a night waking until the clock turns green.

Why it works: If fun starts at 4:30, the body learns to wake at 4:30.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put your child to bed even earlier to "catch up."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Try moving bedtime 15 to 30 minutes later for two weeks.

Why it works: A child can only sleep so many hours. Earlier in means earlier up.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's too early! Go back to bed!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"The clock is red. You can rest or look at books in bed."

Why it works: The clock makes the rule, and quiet time is a fair choice.

More things to say

“Red means rest.”

“Green light! Good morning!”

“Your quiet basket is by your bed.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep the room dark with blackout shades at dawn.
-  Use steady white noise to cover birds and traffic.
-  Leave a small basket of quiet toys or books by the bed.
-  Give lots of praise for waiting for the green light.

Avoid

-  Screens or breakfast before your chosen wake time.
-  Long naps that make up for the early start.
-  Setting the clock for a time that's too hard at first.

Set up for next time

-  Set the color clock for the time they wake now, then move it later by 10 minutes every few days.
-  Offer a bedtime snack with protein if hunger wakes your child.
-  Check that your child isn't too cold toward morning.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child sleeps well under the usual range for their age and is tired or irritable in the daytime, talk with the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Some children are true early birds. If your child wakes happy after a full night, the goal may be quiet play until 6, not more sleep.

part four

Tricky Nights

Naps, trips, siblings, sick days and wet beds. How to protect sleep when life doesn't follow the routine.

19 Naps and Car Naps

21 Sharing a Room With a Sibling

23 Sick Nights and Getting Back on Track

20 Sleeping Away From Home

22 Weekends, Holidays and Time Changes

24 Bedwetting and Night Bathroom Trips

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PART FOUR · TRICKY NIGHTS

Naps and Car Naps

What it looks like

Your child falls asleep in the car at 5 p.m. or takes a long afternoon nap, and then bedtime is impossible.

What's really going on

Sleep pressure builds through the day. A late nap spends it, so there's not enough left at bedtime. Car movement is very calming and hard to resist.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Let a late nap run as long as your child wants.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Wake them gently after 20 to 30 minutes.

Why it works: A short nap takes the edge off without using up the night's sleep.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Drive in the late afternoon and hope they stay awake.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Bring a snack, music and an open window, or plan the trip earlier.

Why it works: A little planning protects bedtime.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Don't fall asleep! Wake up!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Let's sing the loud song. Almost home."

Why it works: A fun job keeps the brain awake better than scolding.

More things to say

“Short rest, then we play outside.”

“Help me count the red cars.”

“Nap is done. Let's get a drink.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep any nap before 3 p.m.
-  Offer quiet time in a dim room if your child no longer naps.
-  Get outside after a nap for light and movement.
-  If a late nap happens, move bedtime a little later that night.

Avoid

-  Using the car or stroller to get a nap late in the day.
-  Skipping a needed nap for a younger child.
-  Letting screens replace rest time.

Set up for next time

-  Keep naps at the same time each day.
-  Ask school or daycare when and how long your child naps.
-  Watch for the age your child is ready to drop the nap.



GET MORE HELP IF

If an older child falls asleep often in the daytime, see the doctor. It can be a sign of poor sleep at night.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Most children stop napping between ages 3 and 5. If bedtime takes forever, the nap is usually the first thing to shorten.

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PART FOUR · TRICKY NIGHTS

Sleeping Away From Home

What it looks like

At a hotel or Grandma's house, your child won't settle, wakes all night, or refuses to get in the strange bed at all.

What's really going on

New smells, sounds, light and bedding are a lot for sensitive senses. Without the usual cues, your child's body doesn't know it's bedtime.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pack light and use whatever is there.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Bring their pillow, blanket, night light, white noise and bedtime book.

Why it works: Familiar things make a new room smell, sound and feel like sleep.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Skip the routine because you're on vacation.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Do the same steps in the same order, even if it's later.

Why it works: The routine is the signal for sleep, wherever you are.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just for one night. You'll be fine."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"New room, same bedtime. Here's your blanket."

Why it works: Pointing out what stays the same lowers the worry about what's different.

More things to say

“Let's set up your sleep spot together.”

“Same book, same song, new bed.”

“I'm sleeping right over there.”

Do this in the moment

-  Show pictures of where you'll sleep before the trip.
-  Let your child explore the room in the daytime.
-  Cover windows with a travel blackout shade or a dark sheet.
-  Stay closer than usual if needed, and return to normal at home.

Avoid

-  Arriving right at bedtime.
-  Late nights several days in a row.
-  Keeping travel habits going once you're home.

Set up for next time

-  Practice with one night at a relative's house.
-  Keep a packed “sleep bag” with travel versions of bedtime items.
-  Check the room for safety: locks, windows, balconies, pools.



GET MORE HELP IF

If travel is coming and sleep is already very hard, ask your child's doctor for advice before you go.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Bring the unwashed pillowcase. The smell of home is one of the strongest sleep signals you can pack.

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PART FOUR · TRICKY NIGHTS

Sharing a Room With a Sibling

What it looks like

One child talks, hums or gets up, and the other can't sleep. Or they play and giggle until late. Nobody is rested.

What's really going on

Siblings often have different sleep needs and bedtimes. A child with autism may make sounds or movements to settle that keep the other awake.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Put both children to bed at the same time and hope.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Stagger bedtimes so one is asleep before the other comes in.

Why it works: A sleeping child is harder to wake than a settling child is to distract.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Tell the sibling to just put up with the noise.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Give the sibling white noise, a bed canopy or a spot farther away.

Why it works: Protecting the sibling's sleep protects the relationship.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Be quiet! You're keeping your sister up!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Whisper voice now. Your sister is sleeping."

Why it works: A clear instruction works better than blame.

More things to say

“Each bed is a quiet island.”

“You can hum with your pillow.”

“Thank you for helping your brother sleep.”

Do this in the moment

-  Do part of the bedtime routine with each child alone.
-  Use a room divider, curtain or bed tent for a private space.
-  Run white noise between the beds.
-  Settle a night waking outside the room if possible.

Avoid

-  Making the sibling responsible for bedtime.
-  Comparing how the children sleep.
-  Punishing settling sounds like humming or rocking.

Set up for next time

-  Thank the sibling and give them their own one-on-one time.
-  Give each child their own night light and comfort items.
-  Have a backup sleeping spot for the sibling on very hard nights.



GET MORE HELP IF

If a sibling is losing sleep most nights or seems anxious or worn out, talk to the doctor about both children.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A bed tent can be a game changer. It blocks light and sight, and gives each child a small space that is all theirs.

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PART FOUR · TRICKY NIGHTS

Weekends, Holidays and Time Changes

What it looks like

After a late weekend, a holiday or the clocks changing, bedtime falls apart and it takes two weeks to get back on track.

What's really going on

The body clock in children with autism is often easy to knock off and slow to reset. One or two late nights can shift the whole week.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let bedtime and wake time slide by hours on weekends.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Keep both within about 30 to 60 minutes of the usual time.

Why it works: A steady clock all week makes Monday morning much easier.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Change bedtime by an hour on the night the clocks change.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Shift by 15 minutes a night for the four days before.

Why it works: Small moves give the body time to adjust without a battle.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's a party. Bedtime doesn't matter tonight."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Tonight is a late night. Tomorrow is a regular night."

Why it works: Naming the exception makes it clear the rule is still there.

More things to say

“Party night, then normal night.”

“The clock changed. Our routine didn't.”

“Same steps as always.”

Do this in the moment

-  Do the full routine even on late nights, just shorter.
-  Get outside in the morning light the day after.
-  Mark special nights on a calendar your child can see.
-  Go back to the usual schedule the very next day.

Avoid

-  Several late nights in a row.
-  Long sleep-ins after a late night.
-  Sugary treats and screens right before a late bedtime.

Set up for next time

-  Plan holiday visits around bedtime when you can.
-  Bring pajamas so your child can fall asleep in the car on the way home.
-  Use blackout curtains when evenings are light.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child's sleep stays off track for more than two or three weeks after a change, ask the doctor for help.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Guard the morning. After a late night, waking at the usual time and getting daylight puts the clock back faster than anything else.

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PART FOUR · TRICKY NIGHTS

Sick Nights and Getting Back on Track

What it looks like

Your child is sick, so you sleep in their room, bring them to your bed or let the tablet run. A week later they're well, and the new habits stay.

What's really going on

Comfort during illness is exactly right. But children with autism hold tightly to new routines, so going back takes a clear plan.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Bring your sick child into your bed.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Sleep on a mattress in their room instead.

Why it works: Their bed stays the place for sleep, and you can leave when they're well.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're not sick anymore. Stop this."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You're all better. Tonight Mom sleeps in her bed again."

Why it works: A clear, kind statement marks the change back.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hope things drift back to normal.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Pick a day and restart the usual routine fully.

Why it works: A firm restart is easier on your child than a slow, unclear one.

More things to say

“When you're sick, I stay close.”

“All better means back to our chart.”

“You know how to do this. You did it before.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep as much of the routine as your child can manage while sick.
-  Go back to the plan as soon as your child is well.
-  Expect two or three harder nights and stay steady.
-  Use the steps from “Needs You There to Fall Asleep” if needed.

Avoid

-  Holding back comfort from a sick child.
-  New habits you can't keep, like screens in bed.
-  Waiting weeks to restart the routine.

Set up for next time

-  Tell your child the plan in the daytime with a picture or a short story.
-  Bring back the sticker chart for the first week.
-  Keep a list of what worked before, so restarting is easier.



GET MORE HELP IF

Call the doctor for fever, trouble breathing, signs of pain, or if your child is hard to wake or can't drink.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A setback is not starting over. A child who has learned to sleep before will relearn it faster the second time.

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PART FOUR · TRICKY NIGHTS

Bedwetting and Night Bathroom Trips

What it looks like

Your child wakes in a wet bed, or gets up several times to use the toilet. Changing sheets at 3 a.m. wakes everyone.

What's really going on

Night dryness depends on the body, not on effort. It often comes later for children with autism. Constipation and deep sleep both play a part.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're too old for this."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Accidents happen. Let's get you dry."

Why it works: Shame adds stress, and stress makes sleep and wetting worse.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Strip and remake the whole bed in the night.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Layer the bed: waterproof pad, sheet, pad, sheet. Pull off the top layer.

Why it works: A two-minute fix gets everyone back to sleep quickly.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stop all drinks from late afternoon.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give plenty to drink in the daytime, less in the last hour, and a toilet trip before bed.

Why it works: Good daytime drinking helps the bladder. The last hour matters most.

More things to say

“Toilet, then bed. Every night.”

“Your body is still learning at night.”

“Dry or wet, I love you.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep the change quiet and quick with the lights low.
-  Have dry pajamas and wipes next to the bed.
-  Use a night light on the way to the bathroom.
-  Use nighttime pull-ups without shame until your child is ready.

Avoid

-  Punishing, teasing or rewarding dry nights.
-  Waking your child at random times to use the toilet.
-  Comparing with siblings.

Set up for next time

-  Put the toilet trip on the bedtime picture chart.
-  Watch for constipation and tell the doctor.
-  Protect the mattress with a waterproof cover.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor if a child who was dry starts wetting again, if there is pain, great thirst or daytime accidents, or if wetting continues past age 7.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Night dryness can't be taught the way daytime toileting can. Protect the bed, protect your child's pride, and give the body time.

TOOLS

A bedroom built for sleep

Walk through your child's room at night with this list. Small changes to the space often do more than any reward chart.

Light

Blackout curtains or shades. A dim red or amber night light if needed. Cover small lights on devices.

Sound

A fan or white noise machine at a low, steady volume, running all night.

Temperature

A slightly cool room, around 65 to 70°F (18 to 21°C), with breathable bedding.

Touch

Soft, tag-free pajamas and sheets your child chose. The blanket weight they like.

Clutter

Toys in bins or out of sight. Calm wall colors. Nothing exciting within reach of the bed.

Safety

Furniture secured to the wall. Window locks. A door chime if your child wanders at night.

How to make it work

- ✓ Lie in your child's bed at night to see and hear what they do.
- ✓ Change one thing at a time so you know what helped.
- ✓ Keep the room the same all night: same light, same sound.
- ✓ Let your child help choose and set things up.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The bed is for sleep. Move play, homework and time-outs somewhere else, and the bed becomes a signal all on its own.

TOOLS

Calming activities before bed

Pick two or three for the wind-down hour. Try them at a calm time of day first, and keep what your child enjoys.

Heavy work

Wall push-ups, carrying books, pushing the laundry basket, animal walks down the hall.

Deep pressure

Bear hugs, a firm back rub, being rolled up in a blanket like a burrito, with the head out.

Warm water

A warm bath or shower about an hour before bed, if your child finds water calming.

Slow movement

Rocking in a chair, slow swinging or gentle stretching. Avoid spinning and fast jumping.

Quiet play

Puzzles, play dough, coloring, looking at books or sorting a favorite collection.

Breathing

Belly breathing with a stuffed animal on the tummy. Smell the flower, blow out the candle.

Words to use

“Time to power down our bodies.”

“Big squeeze or back rub?”

“Slow and quiet, like a sleepy turtle.”

DR. VERA'S TIP

Watch your child, not the clock. If an activity winds them up instead of down, drop it, even if it works for other kids.

PRINTABLE

My bedtime routine chart

Draw or paste a picture in each box, then hang the chart where your child can see it. Do the steps in the same order every night.

My bedtime steps

1 Bath or wash	2 Pajamas	3 Brush teeth
4 Toilet	5 Story	6 Hug and lights out

DR. VERA'S TIP

Let your child point to or check off each step. The chart is the boss, so you don't have to be.

PRINTABLE · SHARE WITH FAMILY, SITTERS AND GRANDPARENTS

My Sleep Plan

Fill this in and give a copy to anyone who puts your child to bed. Bedtime works best when everyone does it the same way.

My name is:

My bedtime and wake-up time:

My bedtime steps, in order:

What I need in my room (light, sound, blanket, comfort item):

Words that help me settle:

If I get out of bed, please:

If I wake in the night, please:

Please don't:

PRINTABLE

Two-week sleep diary

Fill in one row each morning for two weeks. Bring it to your child's doctor or OT.
Patterns show up quickly.

DATE	IN BED AT	ASLEEP AT	NIGHT WAKINGS (TIMES, HOW LONG)	UP FOR THE DAY	NAPS	NOTES: FOOD, SCREENS, MOOD

Patterns I notice:

IMPORTANT

When to get more help

CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY IF

- ✗ Your child stops breathing, turns blue or can't be woken
- ✗ Your child has left the house and you can't find them
- ✗ You feel you or your child are not safe

Call your child's doctor soon if

- ✓ Loud snoring, gasping, long pauses in breathing or mouth breathing in sleep
- ✓ Kicking, jerking, stiffening or staring spells during the night
- ✓ Taking more than an hour to fall asleep, or long night wakings, most nights for a month
- ✓ Very sleepy, irritable or much more active in the daytime
- ✓ Sleepwalking, or leaving the room or house at night
- ✓ Before starting, stopping or changing melatonin or any sleep aid or medication

Who can help

PROFESSIONAL	HOW THEY HELP
Pediatrician	Rules out medical causes: breathing, reflux, constipation, iron, seizures, medication effects
Sleep specialist	Sleep studies and treatment for sleep apnea, restless legs and body-clock problems
Occupational therapist (OT)	Sensory plan, bedroom setup, calming routines and daily schedule
Psychologist or behavioral specialist	Anxiety, fears and step-by-step plans for sleeping alone

Melatonin and other sleep aids are not right for every child. Always talk with your child's doctor about the product, dose and timing first.

FOR YOU

Taking care of you

You can't run on broken sleep forever. Parents of children who sleep poorly have more stress, more illness and less patience. Protecting your own rest is part of the plan, not a reward for finishing it.

Tonight

- ✓ Go to bed soon after your child does
- ✓ Put your own phone to bed outside the bedroom
- ✓ Tell yourself: "This is a phase we are working on."

This week

- ✓ Take turns with a partner so each of you gets one full night
- ✓ Nap when you can without guilt
- ✓ Get daylight and a short walk each morning

Share the load

- ✓ Give your sleep plan to a partner or grandparent
- ✓ Ask about respite care in your area
- ✓ Say yes when someone offers to help

Find your people

- ✓ Local autism parent groups
- ✓ Your child's school or therapy team
- ✓ Online groups with kind moderation

DR. VERA'S TIP

Don't drive when you're very sleepy, and tell your own doctor if exhaustion is affecting your mood or health. Your sleep matters too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

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Dr. Vera helps families turn hard daily moments into calmer, more connected routines. His approach is practical and respectful: understand what the nervous system needs, lower the load, and give parents words and tools they can use the same day.

He is also the author of Dr. Vera's Dementia Action Manuals, including *Stop the Chaos!*

More Calm & Connected Guides

Stop the Meltdown!

What to say and do when your child with autism is overwhelmed.

Stop the Sensory Overload!

Clothes, noise, haircuts, stores and a home calming kit.

Stop the Food Fights!

Sensory-friendly eating without the battle.

Stop the Potty Struggles!

An OT's toileting plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Loneliness!

An OT's guide to helping your child with autism build real friendships.

StartEmpowering.com