

## **Teach Children to Relax themselves to Sleep**

Bedtime doesn't have to be Traumatic!

By Patti Teel

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If you're a parent, it's important to realize that in order for your child to be physically and emotionally healthy as well as a successful student, it's vital for him to get a sufficient amount of quality sleep. As research continues to emerge, we are realizing that a good night's sleep is as important as proper nutrition—affecting mood, immunity, and the ability to learn. Unfortunately, children's sleep problems are extremely common. In 2004, the National Sleep Foundation reported that a whopping 69 percent of children under the age of ten have sleep difficulties. Factors that contribute to this modern day malady include lax rules, difficulty transitioning from the family bed, stress, overstimulation and the media.

While the number of children with sleep problems is staggering, by improving sleep hygiene and teaching children to relax, the majority of them are relatively easy to solve. But most parenting books on the subject focus on babies and give scant attention to the most useful long term solution for children—which is to teach them to purposely relax their bodies and minds so that they can relax and fall asleep. The majority of sleep experts advise parents to abruptly withdraw their attention at bedtime—with no mention of teaching a child self-soothing skills. But many parents are looking for help after having shared their bed or assisted their child to fall asleep for months or even years. When children are abruptly expected to fall asleep without any assistance it sets the scene for the all too familiar nightly bedtime battle. If parents consistently ignore their children's anguished pleas for attention, after weeks of tears and tantrums, children will eventually begin to fall asleep on their own. But in the same amount of time, parents could have avoided the battles—by teaching their kids to relax themselves to sleep while gradually and systematically decreasing their attention.

Children's two most frequent sleep problems involve not being able to fall asleep and awakening during the night unable to fall back asleep. Brief night awakening is normal; however, once kids learn to fall asleep independently at bedtime, they will be able to fall back asleep when they briefly awaken during the night.

For children, learning to relax and fall asleep on their own is an important step towards independence. However, the benefits of conscious relaxation far outweigh even this worthwhile achievement. By learning to purposefully relax and calm themselves, children will become more resilient and better equipped to deal with life's inevitable ups and downs.

### **Ways to Solve your Child's Sleep Problems:**

#### **Pinpoint the problem by keeping a sleep journal.**

For at least a week, record your child's sleep habits. This will help you to

recognize the behaviors or habits that are contributing to a child's sleep difficulties or alert you to a more serious problem. If you determine that you need a physician's assistance, your observations will be invaluable in helping your doctor make an accurate assessment.

**Have a set bedtime.**

Children should consistently go to bed at the same time every night. Even on the weekends, bedtime should not vary by more than one hour a night or a total of two hours for the entire weekend.

**Have a consistent bedtime routine.**

Create a consistent bedtime ritual—in a predictable calming environment that serves as a bridge between the excitement of daytime and the restful quiet of nighttime.

**Practice relaxation techniques.**

During the bedtime routine, take a few minutes to practice self-soothing relaxation techniques such as progressive relaxation, attending to the breath, and visualization.

**If your child has trouble falling asleep, use the Fade Technique.**

Gradually, give your child less and less direction as he uses self-soothing techniques to relax and fall asleep. At first, you may want to sit on the edge of your child's bed while he or she follows the relaxation directions on *The Floppy Sleep Game Book CD*. Or, you can teach your child to relax through a relaxation routine that you create yourself. Over a period of time, as your child becomes more familiar with the relaxation routine, sit further and further away until he or she no longer needs you in the room to relax and fall asleep.

Dubbed "The Dream Maker" by People magazine, Patti Teel is a former teacher and the author of *The Floppy Sleep Game Book*, which gives parents techniques to help their children relax or fall asleep. She is holding Dream Academy workshops at schools, hospitals, and libraries across the country where parents and children learn the playful relaxation techniques from her book and widely acclaimed children's audio series. Children at the Dream Academy workshops practice the three R's by resting their bodies, relaxing their minds, and refreshing their spirits. [www.pattiteel.com](http://www.pattiteel.com)