

# The bedtime connection: The moments before sleep provide a golden opportunity for relationship

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My husband and I met at camp. We were counselors. Between us, we had 30 kids.

Besides the fact that we knew how to have fun, we were good storytellers. There were no campfires. There was no reading hour. No special corner or time of day for books. No ritual circle time for campers to sit cross-legged while we narrated from the pages of their favorite books.

We were storytelling as a means of communication and connection. From the moment we greeted kids off their buses to the time we said goodbye at the end of the day, we told stories to smooth transitions, ease separation anxieties, acknowledge a bruised knee, and make peace from the frustrations and hurts among and between the kids.

So, when my husband and I became parents a dozen years ago, our well-honed

storytelling came in handier than a baby wipe. As parents of a newborn who needed a fourth trimester, woke up every 45 minutes, was startled by the sound of lawn mowers, blenders and vacuum cleaners, we soothed through holding, walking, rocking, nursing and singing for the better part of the first year.

Not only did this ease transitions, calm his frantic nervous system and teach him to trust his environment -- and us -- but reading together, talking and staying close in the gray shadows of a dimly lit room was, and still is, a balm for our spirits, as well as calming for our brains and bodies.

## Stressed and distressed

In our culture, with parents feeling the pressure of balancing family with work and finances with freedom, bedtime has become a highly charged word. Parents are exhausted and stressed, often living at warp speed and struggling with the drain of multitasking.

Maybe you're one of the millions of people who feel that they are starting their days with a sleep deficit and wrapping their days feeling that they didn't get enough done. We can tend to carry a burden of anxiety with us, and can become used to this as our default setting.

In her book "Ask the Children," Dr. Ellen Galinsky shares results of a study in which 600 children from third to eighth grade were asked what they most wanted for their parents. Fifty-six percent of parents guessed that their children would wish for "more time" with them. They were wrong. Actually, most children wished that their parents would be less stressed and tired.

And what about our children?

In this age of distraction, kids are consumed by technology, spending an average of seven hours of screen and device time every day. Add hours of homework, after-school activities and social activities to the mix, and millions of our children are not spending the time they need and want with us for **healthy** emotional, physical and psychological development.

"Kids have so much stress," says Los Angeles-based Dr. Charlotte Reznick, educational psychologist and associate clinical professor of psychology at UCLA, and author of "The Power of a Child's Imagination." A child may be carrying anxiety from a school incident, feeling deeply saddened by a recent loss or anticipating a future one, or trying to

process the confusion and pain of divorce, illness, discord or difficult dynamics in a family.

A child with different needs, who has spent all day trying to cope with and manage impulses, sensory input, and a thousand social cues, can feel like a runaway train by nightfall.

Meanwhile, many parents may feel tired and frustrated at bedtime, and run low on energy and patience. But rising tension at bedtime is not a good state to assume before going to sleep since elevated stress hormones like cortisol can prevent our kids and us from sleeping soundly, restoratively and waking up emotionally and physically ready for another day. Chronic stress is neurotoxic, which means that a young developing brain is particularly receptive to stress and will wire itself accordingly.

"If you battle with your kids before bedtime, you're on the opposing sides. Instead, help your child look inside," suggests Reznick.

"One little girl I worked with was terrified about going to sleep. We worked together and she imagined an animal friend, a white dragon, who wrapped around her bed and kept her safe. After awhile, she started worrying about her parents and her brother, and she sent her dragon's cousins to watch over them. When people told her the dragon was just her imagination, she told them her fears came from her imagination too, so she was choosing to use her imagination to keep her safe instead of scare her.

"I do believe kids have the answers inside them. Our jobs is to help that come out."

### **Tender is the night**

Bedtime is an opportunity to reunite and reconnect with our child. In that process, we discover what may be weighing heavy on her heart and mind. Without the sacredness of our bedtime rituals, there is no sanctuary for our child's deepest needs, no outlet for expressing the pain of disconnection or the longing for reassurances in the face of fleeting fears and anxieties, and no easier pathway to our buried vulnerabilities.

Dr. Joseph diSpenza, author of "Evolve Your Brain," says that there are two doors to the unconscious: right after we wake up in the morning and right before we fall asleep at night. Parents can use this information about the mind and brain to help their kids clear negative feelings, shift moods, and even set the course for a new behavior or thought pattern.

Wellness expert and Cherry Hill resident Michelle Bowers agrees wholeheartedly. As the parents of five boys ages 1 to 12, managing a busy chiropractic practice and their own organization called Planet Wellness, Michelle and her husband Jason both look forward to nightfall -- not because they can't wait to revel in the silence of a quiet house.

"We touch base at the end of the day," says Michelle, who spends her days shuttling between professional appointments, schools and after-school activities with her kids. "We begin our bedtime ritual with the three older kids all together. About an hour before bedtime, we turn everything off. The only thing left on is music, no commercials."

Science shows that electronics before bed, from television to **cellphone** and computer, interfere with the brain's circadian rhythms and production of sleep hormone melatonin. Turning off a cell phone and unplugging before bedtime can improve the quality and quantity of our sleep. In the

absence of technological connections, we can make room for relational ones.

"We reserve our evenings for coming together and talking about how the day went," says Michelle. "My oldest is 12 and he is the first to sleep at 8:30. One thing we always do is talk about our goals for the next day. We talk about what was good in their day and what we're looking forward to. Then, my husband and I take our two little ones. We always end by reading a story."

### Power of storytelling

Parenting magazines often offer tips to preventing bedtime battles, but parents rarely hear about how to encourage bedtime connection, using imagination, hugging and storytelling as pathways to sound sleep and good [relationship](#).

Storytelling, like recess and play, is not a privilege to be revoked, but a ritual to be preserved and honored. When we see it in this way, our child feels the importance and value of this nightly peace ritual, regardless of the chaos that may have preceded it.

My two boys have treasured my husband's well-narrated fictional characters and plots, shared in quiet whispers while they laid still with rapt attention, even as their eyes were closed. Wally Weasel and the Lonely Diesel was one of their favorite nighttime tales conjured in the shadows. Every night, the great motivator for our kids to go to bed was this special time with Dad when they would get to hear the next

chapter in Wally's great adventure.

I once conjured up a story about a hidden jungle, and our boys still remember the waterfall and the two kids they met who showed them a small bamboo box filled with dreams.

"Oh, we love stories!" says Michelle. "Our older kids like us to make stories up. For example, we talk about when we went skiing and climbed the mountain and this big snow avalanche came down and we came across the ski island and we found a cave with a fire pit. We have our repertoire of stories. There's always someone saving someone.

"We have our pirate story, too. Usually, Jude, who's 4, comes into the story and likes to be the one who rescues everyone. After stories, all the kids just easily fall asleep. It calms us, too. My husband and I feel so relaxed afterward."

### Power of touch

One of the most potent ways to calm ourselves and our kids before sleep -- a kind of giant eraser to the blackboard of our shared day -- is time spent in arms, skin to skin for our babies and younger ones, and in close proximity with our older kids. Studies on the effects of touch on our systems show that hugging boosts our immune system, lowers heart rate and blood pressure, and releases calming "connecting" hormones like oxytocin.

Hug expert Kathleen Keating and the author of "The Hug Therapy Book" says hugging "dispels loneliness, overcomes fear and opens doors to feelings." She points to robust research, which shows that hugging "invigorates the body by stimulating the level of hemoglobin which carries oxygen to tissues. When these tissues receive oxygen, they have a new energy that continues to rejuvenate the body."

Hugging lowers heart rate, calms the nervous system, boosts immune function, changes brain chemistry, and releases calming hormones. Anyone who has held a child close has witnessed the effect of that holding on both the child and the grown-up.

Nighttime is that rare window of the day when defenses are down and we have greater access to the golden door of connection. What is it different about it compared to the happy hustle of a busy day's activities or the positive energy of shared laughter and play?

"Right before bedtime, kids tend to talk

more about their fears. It's a chance to get closer to them, and help shift something in their lives," says Reznick. "Breath is powerful. I teach children the Balloon Breath. You imagine blowing up a balloon, the balloon gets bigger, when you exhale, it flattens. When you center yourself, you take control of what's happening."

#### Power of connection

"When we do this nightly ritual, we all feel at peace at night. We feel it's a renewal," say Michelle. "If we don't get that time, it feels incomplete. It feels like we don't have closure to the end of the day."

If bedtime is a renewal, consider that renewal the balm that can strengthen and restore connection with our children. Without it, we each carry the accumulation of life's challenges and conflicts without resolution, which, over time, can lead to the pain of disconnection -- not just in relationship, but within ourselves.

Reznick says, "Even though we let our

children go eventually, they need us forever. We are their  **moms**  and dads. We have that strong beautiful bond with our child.

"In these times that you have with them when they're young, you want to use those precious moments on that heart level. The time we invest in connection is well worth the outcome. It might not seem like much, but our moments of connection add to up to a strong bond years down the road."

Lu Hanessian is the author of acclaimed book "Let the Baby Drive" (St. Martin's Press, 2004), former NBC anchor and Discovery  **Health**  Channel host, international parent educator, and founder of WYSH Wear Your Spirit for Humanity [www.wearyourspirit.com](http://www.wearyourspirit.com) and Parent2ParentU.com.

## MORE INFORMATION

Dr. Reznick's site: [www.imageryforkids.com](http://www.imageryforkids.com)

"The Power of a Child's Imagination" by Dr. Charlotte Reznick

"The Hug Therapy Book" by Kathleen Keating

"Playful Parenting" by Dr. Lawrence Cohen