

## **Now I Lay Them Down To Sleep, What To Do Past Counting Sheep: Combating Bedtime Anxiety**

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The night before the first day of school, our fifth-grade son and I cuddled while conversing about his triumphs as a Pirate of the Caribbean. As his “special” time with me dwindled, he pleaded to allow him to sleep with us. “I’ll sleep on the couch and I won’t make any noise,” he begged. His tone viscerally reminded me of the childhood panic I felt as the final commercial of a 30-minute sitcom aired, and I was banished to my dark, solitary room and the racing thoughts it conjured. Our son’s pirate banter of “walk the plank” so aptly described both of our doomed and gloomed bedtime exiles.

As a parent with childhood bedtime anxiety, I strive to transform “walk the plank” to “walk the line.” Walk the line between catering to children’s bedtime anxiety and thus stymieing their growth of constructive coping skills versus dismissing their unease and thus forcing them to contain overwhelming fears single-handedly. *Walk the line means respecting the parental relationship while respecting the realness of children’s fears and the real tools needed to combat them.*

First, to walk the line, engage children in a discussion of what constitutes a comforting sleep environment. When children have a voice in creating their bedtime atmosphere, they may accept it more willingly. Every child has a unique opinion about a soothing sleep environment, as illustrated by our four children’s four distinct decisions: “Captain Jack” sleeps with his reading light on. The interval between reading and sleeping can provoke anxiety so he prefers to simply fall asleep while reading. Our second son combats anxiety in complete darkness with Clay Aiken crooning in the background. Our daughter insists on full-laboratory brightness, unless she sleeps in one of her brother’s top bunks, in which case she acquiesces in exchange for the company. Our youngest shuns human company and instead prefers the comfort of Edward and James, his trains. Unlike his siblings, he opts for a closed door because the sounds of our nighttime bustle induce longing. Place all viable options on the table, e.g., family pet, sleeping bag, single get-out-of-bed-free pass (avoid electronics which may be over-stimulating). Think outside the box spring, and consider permutations that may seem unconventional.

Second, “walk the line” means replacing the line “Don’t think about that,” to “Think about this instead.” One of parents’ predominant replies to children’s “I’m scared to stay at school for lunch,” “I need to remember my family picture for the first day of school,” or “What if Daddy never comes home?” is “Don’t think about that.” But what happens if I say “Don’t think about Tyrannosaurus Rex”? I imagine your thoughts fixate on Tyrannosaurus Rex, as would your children’s. A more constructive approach to banishing anxiety-provoking thoughts is to busy one’s mind with alternative neutral thoughts that leave no mental space for worry. For example, suggest that children name a musical instrument, Disney character, or grocery item for every letter of the alphabet. Or encourage children to plan their next birthday party or name the family car. Children can also focus their attention on physically relaxing by singing individual body parts to sleep

or by pretending individual body parts have morphed into warm chocolate pudding or Floridian sand.

Finally, to banish bedtime anxiety, release the command for children to sleep. Children hear “Go to sleep,” in two possible ways, neither conducive to slumber. They may hear the utterance as an assignment and strive to please only to realize that the stress and urgency that accompany such striving are antithetical to sleep. The night before our 8-year-old’s return flight from Florida to Chicago, his grandmother recommended that he go to sleep early because they needed to leave early for the airport the next morning. As predictably as children contract stomach viruses when their fathers are out of town, our son’s anxiety that he would not fall asleep quickly became a self-fulfilling prophesy. He telephoned three times from Florida sobbing that Grandma said that he needs rest for the upcoming travel day. The remedy was my releasing him from the assignment to sleep: “Honey, you don’t have to sleep. You have three hours on the plane tomorrow to sleep, plus an hour on the car ride home. Just rest on your bed and read or solve puzzles. When you’re tired, you will sleep. There is plenty of time to sleep.” Soon after relief from the assignment, our son’s eyes closed. I reiterated these words the night before his first day of third grade to prevent the occurrence of an identical scenario. “You will sleep when you are tired. Until then, play with your dominoes or search for Waldo. You can always rest when you get home from school if you are sleepy.”

Alternatively, children hear “Go to sleep,” as a demand, and children instinctively resist parental demands. Forbidding children’s choice of staying awake all night simply grows their desire for that scenario, in the same way that forbidding myself from eating the last chocolate covered Oreo undoubtedly destines me to that very Oreo. Permitting children to stay awake all night allows their natural inclination to sleep when they are tired to dominate, instead of their inclination to defy their parents. When our daughter complains, “I don’t want to go to sleep,” I reply “Don’t go to sleep. Stay awake all night if you wish. You may listen to music, play with your paper dolls, write a story, or look through your books. You never have to sleep if you don’t want to.” Without obstinacy to engage in the forbidden, desire for sleep prevails.

In sum, *transform “bedtime” to “bedroom time.”* Strive to create a comforting bedroom atmosphere where the prescribed activity is resting, not sleeping. Children, nor their parents, can force the arrival of sleep. What children and their parents can control is preparing a calm physical and emotional bedroom climate, which the body reflexively responds to with sleep. I bet my bottom bunk on it!