

Good Night, All Night
Sleep Solutions for Older Children
By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

Our 7-year-old, Josh, has been up in the night for weeks, ever since he saw a scary movie at a friend's house. Sometimes we offer sympathy, but often we are too tired to take him back to bed, or we get angry. We are sleep-deprived and grouchy. Is there hope?

Dear Parent:

Most children can relearn how to sleep through the night after a temporary interruption. In response to his fearfulness, your son received some comforting attention along with some reactive attention that led to his new habit.

Children are concrete and suggestible. Despite their fearfulness and vivid imaginations, we can minimize their excessive worries and shape coping behavior by emphasizing what to do, rather than what to think.

Helping Josh back to normal will require some prompting paired with a practical behavioral approach that involves no sympathy at this point. You have the power to put expectations into action by following this protocol:

- All discussion about how to manage fears must take place during the daytime.
- Find an opportunity when your son is in a reasonably good mood. Appeal to his maturity, and trust in his ability to comply with the expectation to sleep through the night.
- Emphasize the behavioral goal, rather than the unwanted behavior. For example, "Nighttime is for sleeping, and you can sleep through the night...get up in the

morning when the alarm rings.”

- Let Josh know what will happen should he wake in the night: “You are to stay in bed. Your brain will fall back asleep all by itself.”
- Keep your tone very matter-of-fact. Do not threaten consequences or punishment! Emphasis is on mastering the goal.
- Let Josh know – in advance – you will direct him back to his bed to sleep. In this manner, if and when Josh arrives by your bed, he is told, as expected, “Go back to bed. Go to sleep.”
- The parent with the stronger conviction, the one who will not waver, is the better choice for redirecting Josh back to bed.
- There is no need for any emotion or drama, such as anger, scolding or pleading. Keep your tone neutral and definitive. Repeat yourself and stay clear, as if you are directing a plane to its landing.
- Remember, children are energized by your reactivity and may get attached to the process of annoying you. In this manner, you may accidentally reinforce the behavior you wish to diminish.
- All communication speaks only to the behavior expected. Avoid speaking in the negative, such as, “Josh, you need to stop waking us up.”
- If Josh refuses to move and stays in your room, do not react. Breathe, pause for long periods and repeat the directive. Keep it boring and repetitive. Detach. It is his challenge, not yours. If you feel you must take your child back, do so without engaging him.
- During the daytime, you might nonchalantly inform Josh that an earlier bedtime will be necessary due to lost sleep. A later bedtime will be okay when he sleeps through the night. Tell him you trust he is capable of sleeping through the night and he will do so easily and soon.
- There is great power in a parent’s suggestion. Always emphasize the behavior he is expected to do with total confidence that he will master the expectation. “You are almost there by yourself and will not be waking anymore. You are sleeping

easily until your alarm wakes you.” The reward is in his mastery.

The most important element in reshaping behavior is the parents’ confidence in their child’s ability to reach a goal of mastery. When there is a reasonable behavioral expectation, and when we can muster up the patience to direct and redirect behavior, reshaping any behavior is quite possible. Children will work their way toward mastery.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Kensington. Visit www.kayabrams.com to read more articles and learn about parenting workshops, mothers' groups and teen girls' groups.