

# **SLEEPING PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN 4 to 14**

## **About the Author**

Simon Beal is a Clinical Psychologist and specialises in child and adolescent psychology and has a strong interest in children's behavioural issues and helping parents to manage their children's challenging behaviours. Simon started his career in the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), but has now worked in the private sector for close to fifteen years. Simon now has three private practices across Adelaide, South Australia, where he receives referrals from General Practitioners, Paediatricians, Psychiatrists, School Counsellors, Teachers, Families SA, and the Federal Magistrates Court and Family Court of Australia. Simon is registered with Families SA to provide support to children and families in foster care, and Simon is also registered with the Independent Schools Board of South Australia as a behavioural consultant. Simon has the title of expert witness in both the Federal Magistrates Court and Family Court of Australia, where he has been regularly called to give evidence in relation to children's issues. Simon is also a parent of two teenagers, so understands all too well the everyday challenges that parents face. As a result of this experience, Simon believes strongly that parents need practical and sensible advice and strategies to manage their child's challenging behaviour. Simon strongly believes that the modern-day parenting approach is letting parents down in this very challenging and stressful area of parenting.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Children can display many types of sleeping problems, ranging from simply not wanting to go to bed and it then becoming a battle every night, to extreme anxiety over sleeping in their own bed and needing to sleep in a parent's bed every night. Or, if a child goes to bed without too much fuss, then the problem can often be waking during the night and wanting to come into the parent's bed, or waking during the night and disturbing the whole household. Whatever the issue, it is essential for parents to have practical and sensible strategies to rectify these problems, so everyone can get a good night sleep.

Generally there are three main issues that typically are the cause of these sleeping problems. The first is defiance - in other words, the child simply doesn't want to go to bed at bedtime, so they will try every trick in the book to stay up later. This can be because the child doesn't want to miss out on something, or it may be because the child doesn't have an 'off button' and will keep going no matter how tired they get. Whatever the case, it can quickly become very frustrating for the parent, sometimes even infuriating, when the child simply won't settle and go to bed. Parents need time to sit and relax, and the only time they can usually do this is at the end of the day – the last thing a parent needs is to have an endless battle with their child at bedtime.

The second common issue that can be causing the sleeping problem is anxiety – in other words, the child is fearful of

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something and this stops them from going to bed in their own bed, and alone. Hence, the child will continually come out, or call out, or the parent has to sit with the child until they fall asleep, or the child simply goes to bed in the parent's bed, or goes to sleep on the lounge next to the parent – basically anything to avoid the fear. Whatever it ends up being, it's always stressful and rarely does the child get to sleep at a reasonable hour, and never does it make the fear go away, for it will almost certainly be there the next night, and the night after, and so on.

On a completely unrelated issue, parents often ask - what's a reasonable time for a child's bedtime? It seems that over time, a child's 'normal' bedtime has crept out to be later and later, so it's now very hard for parents to know what is reasonable and 'normal'. Based on seeing thousands of families over the years, as a rule of thumb, up to the age of ten, the average bedtime is 7.30pm, with very young children (4 and 5 years) sometimes being even earlier, from 6.30 to 7.00pm. From the age of ten to fourteen, bedtime begins to shift toward 8.30, and from fourteen on, it typically stretches out to 9.00 to 9.30pm. This is based on a child waking at around 7.00pm. If the child tends to wake much earlier, it would be wise to make their bedtime earlier, based on the fact that every child *needs* their sleep. Parents should not be tricked into thinking that keeping a child up later will make them sleep in later – in most instances this doesn't work very well, and only results in the child getting even less sleep.

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Back to the issue of *anxiety* causing a child to have sleeping problems - the most common types of fears are being scared of the dark, being scared of burglars, or the house catching fire etc. In fact, the variety of fears that a child can have at bedtime is endless. It's even quite common for a child to not even know what's making them anxious, it's just a 'feeling' they have, and they can't explain it. Also very common is a child needing to know that mum or dad is still awake, with the child fearing that they will be the last one awake in the house. Therefore mum or dad is expected to stay up until the child eventually goes to sleep, no matter what time that may be, and no matter how exhausted the parent may be. Some children can't go to sleep until the parent gets home from work or from being out, with the child just needing to know that mum or dad is home, and only then can they go to sleep.

The third issue that's often the cause of a child's sleeping problem is where a child simply can't settle, or maybe better described as "they can't switch their brain off". This is an easy issue for adults to relate to, as it's a very common reason behind adult insomnia. When this is the cause, often the child isn't being naughty, and nor are they worried about anything, but they'll lie in bed at bedtime, sometimes for hours, and simply can't get to sleep. This usually causes them to either call out or come out, saying to the parent that they can't get to sleep, usually to be told to get back to bed. Or, children with this problem will easily find an excuse as to why they can't get to sleep, such as they need a drink, or they have a

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sore toe, or they had something incredibly important to say that they've now just forgotten. Either way, one thing is for sure, they're not going to sleep any time soon, and its hard work and very frustrating for the parent.

The examples mentioned above highlight how varied and complex children's sleeping problems can be. It must also be remembered that these problems occur at the end of what is usually a very long day, when parents have basically 'had enough'. The last thing a parent wants is a major battle, which risks the child having a major meltdown, which then guarantees that no-one is going to get to sleep any time soon. In the absence of any other helpful strategies or ideas, parents are often forced to give in, and this usually results in the problems getting much worse. Parents then often hope that the child will soon grow out of the behaviour, however, a word of caution - when it comes to children's sleeping problems and the bad habits that have been formed to try to deal with these problems - children rarely grow out of these bad habits, not at least for a very long time. This is the very reason this manual goes up to the age of fourteen years. Fourteen is the oldest age a child has been seen for still needing to sleep in their parent's bed. So if a five, six, or seven year old is needing to sleep in a parents bed, or needing a parent to sit with them until they fall asleep, be warned – they will not grow out of this any time soon.

For all the reasons and types of problems mentioned above, parents need a very clear understanding of what they need to

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do, why they need to do it, and practical effective strategies that make this possible. No matter how bad the situation has become, it's possible to get back on top of a child's sleeping problems, so everyone can enjoy a good night's sleep.

The strategies contained in this manual are not the standard sleeping strategies typically given to parents, such as having a bath before bed, or a glass of warm milk, or the scent of lavender on the pillow, as most parents have already tried these strategies and found that they didn't work. The strategies in this manual are not the warm and fuzzy strategies that are typical in parenting today, because warm and fuzzy strategies also won't work. The strategies are simple but effective, and it's reasonable to expect improvements within a few days to a week. However, absolutely vital to these strategies being effective is the parent's ability to stick with the plan and follow it through, no matter what. And for this to occur, parents need to be as sure as possible that what they're doing is the best way to fix their child's sleeping problem, and that what they're doing will not make the problem worse in any way (more on this later in the manual).

### **Sleeping Problems - Type 1**

As mentioned above, there are three main causes behind children's sleeping problems, the first being defiance, where the child is being naughty and not doing as their told. Basically the child doesn't want to go to bed because they don't want to miss out on anything and they're having too much fun staying up. Basically it's boring going to bed, so they don't

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want to do it. While this can be seen as less worrying than the other main causes of sleeping problems, it can still cause just as much stress to any parent.

For Type 1 sleeping problems, parents need to treat it exactly the same as for any other inappropriate behaviour, that is, rules and consequences (Please refer to the Introduction & Rationale Manual for more details about this general approach to a child's challenging behaviour.) There is every chance that if you have a strong willed, and often self-centred child, along with other challenging behaviours during the day, it's reasonable to expect further challenges at bedtimes.

However, unfortunately for parents in this situation, bedtimes create an extra dimension that also needs to be dealt with. As mentioned above, it's at bedtime that parents have often already 'had enough' – they are tired and probably already at their wits end from dealing with their child's challenging behaviour during the day, which makes it extra hard to follow through with the much needed consequences that are required at bedtime. Further to this however is the problem that it *is* at the end of the day, which means the standard consequences aren't then going to be very practical or effective. For example, the consequence of Time-Off Bedtime (Please refer to Defiance & Daily Battles 5 to 12) isn't going to work very well when it's already the child's bedtime. In other words, the parent can't take time off the child's bedtime if it's already the child's bedtime. Yes, the parent can try the strategy of taking the time off of the next night's bedtime,

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however this often doesn't work either, because the next night the child will continue to 'muck around' when they are supposed to be going to bed early, thus making a game of it and it therefore it never really being of consequence, and the parent will inevitably end up chasing their tale - that is, taking time of every next bedtime, with the child never going to bed early. (Please refer to Defiance & Daily Battles 5 to 12 or more details on this issue.)

Equally, the consequence of Time-Out in the Toilet doesn't tend to work very well when it's already the child's bedtime. Parents are often reluctant to send their child into Time-Out when they should be going to bed, as this pretty much guarantees that the child won't be getting to bed and settling any time soon. Therefore 'Time-Out' as a consequence tends to work against parent at bedtimes. It's also the case that some children would almost prefer going to Time-Out if it means not going to bed – remember the child that thrives off of the battle (Please see the Introduction & Rational Manual for more information.)

Either way, the parent needs to have other consequences that the parent can follow through with, and that are of consequence to the child. These alternative consequences will be discussed later in this manual.

### **Sleeping Problems - Type 2**

For many parents, the second cause of Sleeping Problems, *anxiety*, is more concerning and therefore creates a bigger

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problem to deal with. This is understandable, as the idea that a child has an anxiety problem is far more concerning for a parent than when a child is simply being naughty. When a parent suspects the child's sleeping problem is due to anxiety, naturally the parent feels sorry for the child, some parents even worry that it's something they've done that's caused the anxiety. Fortunately for parents, in 99.9% of cases it's nothing of the sort – in most situations where anxiety is causing a child's sleeping problems, it usually comes from nowhere, 'out of the blue', with parents usually scratching their heads wondering where on earth the child got this anxiety from.

In dealing with any anxiety issue in children, a crucial starting point for any parent is to get a good understanding of anxiety - how it works, why it often gets worse if not treated the right way, and what needs to be done to fix it. The good thing about treating anxiety problems in children is that it's not necessary to know where the anxiety has come from, which is good, because as mentioned above, often it just appears out of nowhere. When treating anxiety, what's really important is understanding how anxiety works, and then working out how best to treat it. The other good thing about treating anxiety in children is how quickly it can be dealt with and how quickly anxiety problems can be fixed, allowing the child, and the rest of the family, to return to normal. Anxiety just needs to be understood and treated in exactly the right way.

[What is Anxiety?](#)

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Firstly, anxiety is perfectly normal, we all have it – it's that worrying feeling we get when we think something will or has gone wrong. While anxiety is usually thought of as a 'mental' problem, when anxiety increases, it also automatically causes physical symptoms as well, such as nausea and vomiting, increased heart rate, dizziness and shaking etc. In fact, it's the physical symptoms triggered by anxiety that can make it quite confusing for the parent as to how to treat the situation – because the parent is left wondering - is it anxiety that's making them feel sick, or are they really sick. As mentioned above, put simply, anxiety is triggered by the fear of something bad happening. Another very important fact about anxiety is that there is 'reasonable' anxiety, but there's also 'irrational' anxiety, and it's the irrational anxiety that is usually behind a child's sleeping problems. The difference between the two is best understood as this – 'reasonable' anxiety is the anxiety a child feels if they were made to sleep in a dark alley, alone! Obviously, they would feel very anxious - this is perfectly normal and reasonable, and we wouldn't expect a person to feel any different in this situation. Then there's the 'irrational' anxiety, where a child has the same feeling, but for no obvious or reasonable reason. In other words, needing to sleep in their own bed at night, or going to sleep without a parent sitting beside them, or without the parent needing to be sitting in the lounge where the child can see them. All of these 'fears' are unreasonable, and it's these fears that need to be dealt with. Put another way, what is being asked of the child is nothing unreasonable, nothing that is not expected of every other child at this age.

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Regardless of what the fear is, there is one vital rule that must be followed whenever anxiety needs to be overcome – that is, *the fear must be faced*, the anxiety needs to be challenged – this is the only way the anxiety will be dealt with. When it comes to dealing with anxiety, all those old-fashioned sayings are absolutely true – such as, face your fears, or, if you fall off a bike, get straight back on, and the same with falling off a horse. All of these ideas are based on facing the fears, because when a person faces their fears, they end up proving that there was nothing to fear in the first place – this is the only way to get rid of anxiety.

However, when it comes to these fears that children have, it needs to be understood that to the child, the fear is real. Therefore they are going to feel anxious, and this will make them want to avoid whatever it is you're asking them to do. To the parent, the fear is completely unreasonable, but no amount of telling the child will make any difference – to the child, it's real - therefore they're not going to want to face it. For parents, this too is a very important point to understand. As the fear itself is irrational, no amount of reasoning and common sense will make any difference. No matter how many times a parent tries to explain to the child that there's nothing to fear, when it comes to the situation that the child needs to face, the fear and anxiety feeling will be there, stronger than ever. This is precisely why it is a waste of time trying to reason and reassure the child that there's nothing to worry about, it simply won't do any good. However, not only will reasoning not do any good, reasoning and reassuring can

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actually make the anxiety worse. This is because when a parent tries to reason and reassure the child, the parent is actually giving credence to the fear itself – the parent is essentially sending the message to the child that there is actually something to worry about. A very good example of this, and quite relevant to sleeping problems caused by anxiety, is the common example of a young child scared of monsters at bedtime. The child will ask a parent to check under the bed, or check in the cupboard, to make sure there is no monster hiding there. If the parent does check, in other words, the parent tries to reassure the child, the parent is actually sending the message that there *could* be a monster there. What a parent needs to do is tell the child they won't check because there's no such thing as monsters.

### Things Not to Do

When it comes to sleeping problems caused by anxiety, parents are often told that there must be an underlying issue that's causing the anxiety. A very common explanation for a child being anxious about sleeping in their own room, or needing a parent to sit with them until they fall asleep, is that this is a form of separation anxiety, and the child is simply telling the parent via their behaviour that they need more attention from the parent. When this is suggested as the cause, it's only natural that the solution is therefore for the parent to spend more time with the child, to satisfy this so-called need, and all will be fine. However, as any parent that has tried this approach will quickly testify, this is not the

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answer, the problem doesn't go away – if anything, it usually get's worse. The reason for this is simple - it's because the problem wasn't a lack of attention in the first place. This common explanation that the child's behaviour is 'attention seeking' stems from research into children that were severely neglected and abused, such as in orphanages in the old days, where it was found that when the children received appropriate adult care and attention, their behaviour improved. Well-meaning researchers have incorrectly applied this to modern-day families where there is never this extreme lack of attention. And for most children, any extra attention is never enough, so when a parent tries to give the child more attention, the child simply wants more attention. Not only this, but by giving the child more attention, the parent is also inadvertently reinforcing the child's behaviour, thus making the problem worse, not better. This is a classic example of parents getting confused by so called parenting experts, and then confusing what a child *wants* with what a child *needs*. A child *needs* to learn to sleep in their own bed at night, and to settle themselves without having someone else sitting next to them. (For more details, please refer to the Introduction and Rationale Manual.)

Equally, if it's not separation anxiety or attention seeking, parents worry that there must be some other underlying reason or issue. Parents then 'wrack their brain' trying to work out what it is, or what they've missed, or what they have or haven't done in the past, that could possibly be the cause of this problem. This is especially the case if the problem has

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'come out of the blue', for no apparent reason. And when this is the case, parents will tend to quiz their child over it, repeatedly asking what's bothering the child. In most instances, the child doesn't know what's bothering them, all they know is that they're worried about going to sleep in their own bed, and when a parent asks often enough, it's not uncommon for a child to make up an answer. Then all hell can break loose – as a child will often come up with anything, just to find a reasonable explanation of why they can't sleep in their own bed. This is often when children will say comments such as "my life sucks", "you don't love me", "I miss you too much", or "someone bullied me today at school", or of course, the old favourite, "I feel sick". Children *know* what to say to parents to get the parent feeling sorry for them, this is a clever way for a child to get what they want.

From many years' experience of working with children and families in this stressful area of sleeping problems, it's fair to say that in 99.9% of cases, there are no underlying issues that are causing the problem. It simply boils down to the fact that the child would prefer to be with the parent, it's comforting and reassuring, and being in the parents bed is simply the number one place to be when a child is trying to get to sleep. It also needs to be remembered that even if there was something bothering the child, such as parents separating, or they are being bullied at school etc, these problems don't change the fact that the child needs to get a good night sleep, in their own bed. In fact, if the child is having a hard time with

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something that is happening during the day, it's even more reason to get a good night sleep, in their own bed.

For these reasons, it is best for a parent not to ask what's bothering the child, especially at bedtime, because when asked often enough, the child will come up with something. And then the parent's job is made that much harder, because the parent then feels sorry for the child, will pay the child extra attention, or let the child sleep in the parent's bed – whatever the parent does, it only reinforces the problem.

To emphasize this point, when it's the child's bedtime, it's never a good time to talk about a child's worries – this only opens up a can of worms when the child should be settling and going to sleep. By all means, find a time during the day, or after school to discuss any problems, but never at bedtime.

### Distinguishing between Reasonable and Irrational Fears

When a child can explain what it is that's worrying them, sometimes it can be confusing to the parent as to what an irrational fear is and what a reasonable fear is, leading the parent to question whether they should make the child face the fear. For example, a child might be scared of burglars, especially if they've seen a news bulletin that night about a house break-in, or the child may be worried about the house burning down, if they've seen a 'house on fire' on the news. While these fears are understandable, for the parent, it's best to think of it in terms of whether it's something that a child *needs* to be worried about, or more importantly, if a child

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worrying about it won't make any difference anyway. Again, in almost all cases, it's not something that a child *needs* to be worried about, therefore the fear is unreasonable, falling into the same category as irrational, meaning it needs to be challenged, in other words, the child needs to face their fear. To further explain this point, it can also be reasoned that the child sleeping in the parent's bed won't do anything to change whether the house will be burgled or whether the house may burn down. It's basically the parent's job to worrying about these things, not the child, so make the child go to sleep in their own bed, as facing these fears is the only way the fears will go away.

When a parent can see that there's some validity to the child's fears, such as their house was broken into last week, and now the child is fearful that it will happen again, it's best to follow this simple formula. Give the child two statements that will challenge their fear, such as the house now has locks on all the doors and windows, and the house now has a burglar alarm (basically any statement that is true and helps to challenge the child's fear), then *do not* discuss it any further, simply get the child to keep repeating to themselves the 'challenge statements'. Discussing it at bedtime only adds credence to the child's worries, and reinforces the anxious behaviour because the parent is paying extra attention to the child.

### Will I Traumatise My Child?

When children are faced with something they fear, their reactions can range from being mildly upset to extreme

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hysteria. When parents are faced with the later, but yet know that they are supposed to force the child to face their fears, they have a major dilemma on their hands. Due to the level of reaction they are often faced with, parents often think that they must be making it worse, or that they will traumatise their child by forcing a child to face their fear.

It is absolutely vital that every parent understands that they *will not* traumatise their child by forcing their child to face an unreasonable fear. The only time a child would be traumatised is when they are being asked to face something that was completely unreasonable, such as sleeping alone in a dark alley at night – this would of course be traumatic. But sleeping in their own bed at night – this is in no way traumatic. If it was, 99% of children would be traumatised, as would all adults, because this is what we all had to do as children. The child's reaction is only 'extreme' because the child is strong-willed and their personality is intense, this means everything they do is 'full-on'. Also, it needs to be remembered that, just as with a tantrum, once the child reaches a certain point, everything becomes irrational, and hence the child's reactions quickly become massive *over*-reactions.

So, when it comes to sleeping problems caused by anxiety, there are a few very important points to remember. Firstly, the anxiety the child is feeling is irrational – this means two things – firstly, reasoning and reassuring won't help, and will probably make it worse, and secondly, it's an unreasonable fear, which means the child *will not* be traumatised in *any way*

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when being made to face the fear. The only other point that needs to be remembered is simple, in order to get rid of anxiety, the child must face their fears.

### What Not To Do

Because tackling these sleeping problems are so stressful for parents, it's vital for a parent to know that what they're doing is right and ok – this enables them to be strong enough to see it through to the end – where a child is comfortably and happily sleeping in their own bed, all night. Therefore it's important to address some of the other strategies that are sometimes suggested, because the last thing a parent needs to be wondering is whether this strategy is going to work, and then second guessing themselves and then think “maybe we should try something else”.

### Doing It Gradually?

Truthfully, if a parent was to pick up any ‘sleeping’ book for children’s sleeping problems, they will almost certainly read that the best approach is to take things very gradually. This is purely based on the concept of progressively challenging the anxiety, which is a very standard approach when it comes to challenging any anxiety problem in children. The idea of it being gradual is that the child experiences less anxiety, therefore it's easier to face the fears – in other words, when it comes to children, exposing them to the anxiety situation *gradually* simply means that the child has a *lesser* reaction, therefore it's easier for everyone to deal with. This approach

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sounds very sensible and nice, however in reality there are a few major problems with this gradual approach when it comes to tackling sleeping problems.

Firstly, when it comes to getting a child to sleep in their own bed, and they are currently sleeping in the parent's bed, or on the lounge or wherever, it's actually quite difficult to come up with a gradual approach. For example, by following a gradual approach, it would often involve firstly moving the child to a mattress on the floor in the parent's bedroom, and then progress to being gradually further and further away from the parent's bed, eventually ending up with the child being back in their bed, but usually with the parent sleeping on a mattress in the child's room. Then the process is reversed, with the parent gradually moving further and further away, until the parent is back in their own bed – in other words, *painstaking!* This is the reality of a gradual approach when it comes to the problem of getting a child to sleep in their own bed.

But not only is it very impractical, it's also a very long, drawn out process, and it can take months for the child to end up in their own bed, with the parent back in their own bed. And the real problem with this gradual approach is that the longer it takes, the more likely a situation will arise where there is a set-back. Common setbacks may be things like the child getting sick and then they are 'allowed' to sleep in the parent's bed, or the family going away on holidays, where the child might be sleeping in the same room as the parent. These changes in routine will almost certainly result in some set-

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back, where the child will resist very strongly going back to the normal arrangement when things are back to normal. These setbacks only 'drag out' the process much longer, prolonging the 'agony' for all concerned.

After treating children's sleeping problems for many years, and seeing hundreds and hundreds of families in all sorts of difficult situations, experience says that when it comes to fixing the sleeping problem, and there are the two choices between doing it gradually or 'leaping in the deep end', it's always best to 'leap in the deep in'. 'Leaping in the deep end' simply means challenging the anxiety 'head on' and insisting that the child sleep in their own bed for the entire night right from the start.

It must also be remembered that in challenging the anxiety gradually, this is actually a form of avoiding the anxiety, and when the anxious situation is avoided, this inadvertently feeds the anxiety, as it's actually sending the message to the child that there must be something to worry about if it needs to be challenged gradually. This of course is completely the wrong message to send – the message that needs to be sent to the child is that they must sleep in their own bed, no matter what, because there is nothing to be anxious about in the first place.

### **Sleeping Problems – Type 3**

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The third type of Sleeping Problem in children is where the child isn't being naughty, they're not worried about anything in particular (although they may end up worrying about something, or anything!), but they simply can't switch their brain's off in order to go to sleep. As mentioned above, this will usually lead to endless calling out or coming out, where the child will find any excuse to get the parent's attention, and in the process, not go to sleep. Or, in some instances, the child will find something else to occupy their busy brain, such as reading a book, playing with toys, or sneaking their Ipad into bed with them. Whatever they try, it's absolutely certain that they aren't going to sleep.

In most instances, this is just how the child is - they have an over-active mind, which at other times is usually described as being very busy, or hyperactive, or simply a deep thinker. On a positive note, this often seems to be associated with a higher than average IQ, but whatever the case, it stops the child from getting to sleep, and causes major stress and frustration for the parent.

Just as it is for sleeping problems where *anxiety* is the issue and that this needs to be treated in exactly the right way, so too does the issue of a child not being able to switch their brain off.

The approach required is best thought of as a two-pronged approach. Firstly, and by far the easiest to accomplish, is to make it as easy as possible for the child to get to sleep. This involves doing all of the 'normal' bedtime routine strategies

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that are typically recommended for children's sleeping difficulties, such as having a bath, allowing plenty of time to wind down, have a drink, read a story, etc. etc. Then the most important thing of all – give the child's brain something to focus on, but nothing that will over-stimulate their brain, such as TV, their Ipad, or even reading (most children that enjoy reading will find reading is too stimulating for their brain, therefore stopping them from getting to sleep).

The idea behind this strategy is simply to give the child's brain something to focus on, therefore giving their overactive brain something to do, but not enough to keep them awake. By far the best strategy to mildly occupy a child's brain is a 'sleep CD' – a CD that the child can listen to every night at bedtime - and by far the best type of 'sleep CD' is a child's story – it can be anything the child likes (and best not for it to be scary). The 'sleep CD' works on three different levels. Firstly, it acts as a distraction for the child's busy mind, keeping it mildly occupied, but not stimulating enough to keep the child awake. Secondly, it serves as background noise, so the child isn't lying there listening for whether the parent is going to bed, or wondering what the dog is barking at. Thirdly, and very importantly, by playing the same CD each night, this becomes a familiar part of the child's sleep routine - being 'familiar' makes the child feel more settled, and the brain also naturally associates, or pairs, listening to the CD with going to sleep. It must be remembered that our brains rely strongly on 'association', and it's this association that best helps a child get to sleep.

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Once the bedtime routine is in place and the child has their 'sleep CD', the other part of the two-pronged approach needs to be tackled, however this is by far the more important of the two. Central to this second 'prong' is the concept of the child *not having any other choice but to lie in bed quietly* – in other words, all of the other options need to be taken away. In some ways this sounds easy, but essentially this means that the child must somehow be stopped from calling out, screaming out, crying, kicking the walls, coming out, sneaking out, or playing with toys, anything that means they are not lying in quietly with nothing to do. This is by far the most vital concept when it comes to getting a child to sleep – it will be discussed in greater detail shortly.

### **Unsure Which is Which?**

So far, sleeping problems have been split into three types - naughty behaviour, where a child simply isn't doing as they're told - problems caused by anxiety - and problems caused by the child not being able to switch their brain off. Having considered these three causes, it's very important to realise that in fact they all need to be treated in the same way – that is, the child needs to do as their told.

While this is easily understood when it comes to the child being naughty, when it comes to either anxiety or not being able to switch their brain off, it seems to be much harder for

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parents, but it doesn't change the fact that in both of these situations, the reality is that a child has to do as they're told.

When its anxiety, understandably the child doesn't want to face the fear, however the parent knows that the only way to get rid of the fear is to face it - therefore the child needs to do as they're told. This is probably one of the most difficult aspects for parents when treating their child's anxiety problems, that is, to make the child do something they don't want to. For parents, it's made extra hard because they know the child isn't doing it to be naughty. In fact, the parent will often feel sorry for the child. But this doesn't change the fact that the child has to face their fears, no matter what. So it's the parent that comes across as the mean and nasty parent for making the child face their fears. Unfortunately, there is quite simply no other way around it, and it's not even worth repeatedly explaining this to the child, they simply won't be happy with you at all. Maybe when they're happily going to sleep in their own bed with no worries at all, or when they're able to go on 'sleep-overs', will they *sometimes*, very quietly, admit that maybe it was a good thing to face those fears.

Similarly, when the sleeping problems are due to the child not being able to switch their brain off, it's equally hard for the parent to take this 'tough' approach. The child isn't being naughty as such, it's just that they've got an overactive brain. As discussed above, the best way to treat this type of problem is to give the child something 'mild' to distract their brain, and

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then give them no option but to lie in their bed quietly, as this is the only way they will be able to get to sleep.

Therefore, when looking at all three approaches to treating the three types of Sleeping Problems, they all end up being much the same, the child simply needs to do as they're told. Therefore, there is actually no longer a need to decide which is which.

### **The Most Important Factor of All – Having No Other Option**

Despite saying that there are three main types of Sleeping Problems, there is also another way of looking at sleeping problems in children. This is better thought of as a vital concept that sits alongside the problems of a child being naughty and battling not to go to sleep, of a child being anxious and wanting to avoid facing their fears, or where a child simply can't switch their brain off.

It's the concept of *NOT HAVING ANY OTHER OPTION*.

This leaves the parent with only one problem – how on earth do you get a child to do as they're told at bedtime, regardless of whether it's because they're being naughty, or whether it's because they need to face their fears, or whether they can't turn their brain off and just need to lie there until they get to sleep.

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### How to Take Away the Options

When it comes to taking away a child's options, a parent has several options. Firstly, the parent can physically prevent a child from doing something – this certainly takes away any option a child has – but when it comes to making the child lie in bed quietly, with nothing else to do, it's near impossible to physically make them - after all, it's not acceptable to tie the child to the bed (as tempting as this may sound for some parents).

This then leaves the parent with only two possible alternatives – they can either reward the child for staying in bed, or have a consequence for the child getting out of bed. This is based purely on well-established behaviour management principles. To get a person to do something that they really don't want to, the person needs to be strongly motivated, and motivation can only come from either being rewarded or from trying to avoid the consequences of not doing it.

### Rewards

When it comes to getting children into better sleeping habits, most modern-day parenting strategies and advice seems to rely strongly on rewards for motivating the child to stay in their bed – which isn't surprising given the general trend in parenting today. While rewards can be effective for some, it's often the case that they simply don't work well for others, and especially if the problem has been around for a long time, or if the problem has become quite severe. This is simply

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because a reward just isn't big enough to outweigh the reasons for the child not staying their own bed. Take the standard example of a child not staying in their own bed at night, and the parent tries to implement a reward program, where the child gets a sticker for every night they stay in their bed, and when they have five stickers, they get a reward, such as McDonalds for dinner, or a special toy they've been wanting. This sounds like it could work, but invariably, when it comes to bedtime, and the child is lying their debating whether they should stay there or not, the reason for them getting out of bed often far outweighs the reward of getting a treat after five nights. And not only is this approach often ineffective, it also creates its own problems, such as when another child, who is staying in their own bed and doing the right thing without any fuss, gets nothing – they too want to be rewarded. Also, parents will often report that once the child has got the reward, the behaviour returns again. Hence, rewards are often ineffective and only create further problems. This then leaves a parent with only one option – consequences.

### Consequences

When it comes to stopping a behaviour, there needs to be a consequence, and for a consequence to be effective, it must be a big enough consequence for the child. This is a vital point to understand, and for more information relating to this point, please refer to the Introduction and Rationale Manual.

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So quite simply, when it comes to taking away the options and making a child stay in their bed, with nothing to do, there must be big enough consequence – and this means that the child really has to hate it. Only then does the child accept the fact that they just need to stay in their own bed. The parent essentially has to create the situation where the child is lying in bed, contemplating getting out of bed, but then is stopped by the thought of the consequence they will get if they don't stay in bed. And remember, the consequence needs to be big enough to 'match' the alternative, which may be something as good as is sleeping in the parent's bed – therefore the consequence will need to be major!

### **The Problem of Waking During the Night**

Now that the problem of 'taking all the options away' and the importance of this approach has been discussed, it's also very important to consider another common issue with children's sleeping problems – the problem of the child waking during the night. Rather than treat this as a fourth type of sleeping problem, it's often better seen as simply a repeat of the initial problem when getting the child to bed at bedtime – in other words, it can be caused by naughtiness, or anxiety, or the child can't switch their brain off and get back to sleep. (Rarely is it naughtiness – rarely will a child wake during the night so that they can do something they're not supposed too - although several children have been known to wake and secretly play the X-Box for several hours, and raid the pantry – this would

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be treated in exactly the same way, in other words, a *major* consequence.)

However, rather than to try and understand the cause for waking – because a child will come up with any excuse - there is a better way to look at it. Quite simply, when a child wakes at night, no matter what they're worried about or thinking about, for most children, the number one place to be is in the parent's bed. It's really as simple as that – when a child is in a parent's bed, a child feels completely at ease and has nothing to worry about. This is exactly why a child, when they are allowed to sleep in the parent's bed, is usually asleep before their head hits the pillow. For a child, it simply doesn't get any better than being in a parent's bed. This is very important to understand, for it's this reason alone that makes rewards and minor consequences ineffective. It's also vital to understand that this is simply something that the child 'wants' really badly, (note the emphasis on the word 'wants', this is not a *need*). In other words, the child doesn't '*need*' to be in the parent's bed. But because this is such a strong 'want', given the slightest opportunity, it's a very powerful motivator, and the child will fight very hard for the chance to be in the parent's bed. And the harder a child fights, the more confusing it is for a parent – parents then start to think 'maybe the child does need it, for some reason'? In everyday circumstances, even when there is some stressful things going on, a child does not 'need' to sleep in their parent's bed, it's just something that they want. In fact, it is such a powerful motivator that it can have the effect of actually waking a child up. This is due to the fact that

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everyone goes through a natural cycle of deep sleep followed shallow sleep – often we semi-wake, turnover, and go back to sleep. However, if a child has a better option available – that is, to get into their parent’s bed, when they go through the semi-awake phase, this option is so strong that it will wake them up, and before the parent knows it, the child is beside them. Remember, a child doesn’t need it, they simply want it. And if there are stressful things going on, what everyone actually needs, more than ever, is a good night’s sleep, in their own beds!

The only solution to this problem of the child waking during the night is to ‘take away the option’. Only then does a child get used to semi-waking, turning over, and going back to sleep. And as hard as it is to comprehend for some parents - given the endless battles they’ve had trying to get their child to stay in their own bed – it’s truly remarkable how quickly a child will give up on this behaviour when the child ‘senses’ that *there is no option*. The only challenge therefore left for the parent is ‘how to take away the option’. As already discussed, the only way to take the option away is to have a big enough consequence.

It must also be remembered that when a child gets better at settling themselves at bedtime, and when they are going to sleep without any fuss, it becomes far easier for them to also do this after waking during the night. The situation just needs to be treated in exactly the same way as for when the child is going to bed at bedtime – they can have their sleep CD playing

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quietly to help them get back to sleep, and the parent needs to leave the room before the child goes back to sleep.

Having discussed the problem of waking during the night, it's also probably a good idea to re-look at the issue of "will I traumatise my child by sending them back to their own bed?" This is a big worry for some parents, and it therefore makes it hard to follow through with the consequences. Again, the best way to look at this is to remember that you will not traumatise a child by asking them to do something that is perfectly reasonable, something that we'd expect from any child at that age. So when it comes to sleeping in their own bed, this is completely normal, therefore it can't be traumatic. They may not be happy about it, and with a strong-willed determined child, they will let you know in no uncertain way that they aren't happy about it, but it simply won't be traumatising.

### Nightmares

A common reason for a child waking during the night and wanting to come into a parent's bed is the child having a nightmare. However, this is problematic, because it's also often the case that 'a nightmare' is often the *first* excuse a child will try when they have simply woken and now want to come into the parent's bed, for no other reason than that it's the number one place to be. So, when it comes to breaking the habit of a child waking and coming into the parent's bed, for the first month at least, it's very important to not allow this as an option. Even if the child has obviously had a nightmare, if they are allowed to sleep in the parent's bed, they have then

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worked out an option for not sleeping in their own bed. (Children very rarely have nightmares every night, or even every second, third or fourth night – if a child is saying they are have nightmares more frequently than once or twice a week, it would be important to consider what else may be happening – in other words, is the behaviour being rewarded by being allowed to sleep in the parent’s bed.)

(Note: If you suspect your child is having genuine nightmares more frequently than what is normal -i.e. more than one or two per week - it may be worth contacting Simon Beal to get advice on how best to treat the situation.)

It’s also worth pointing out that if a child does have a genuine nightmare, there is no reason why they can’t be settled in their own bed. The child ‘needing’ to sleep in the parent’s bed usually comes from the parent not wanting to get up and put the child back into their own bed – it’s far easier, and warmer, to just let the child get into bed with the parent.

### No-one Getting Enough Sleep?

The issue of no-one else in the house getting enough sleep raises another issue for parents when they are trying to break the habit of a child waking and coming into the parent’s bed – very often, a parent is concerned about waking up other members of the family – either a younger sibling, or a partner that needs to get up early for work the next day. Unfortunately there is no easy option to address this problem, apart from the ‘affected’ individual moving out for a short

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time, which isn't always very practical. However, a better way to look at this problem is by weighing up all the long-term stress that is currently being caused due to a child's sleeping issues, versus the short-term stress of dealing with the problem in the first place. In other words, it usually ends up being far more effective to 'batten down the hatches' and deal with the problem – in other words, prepare the household for a tired week, buy some earplugs, and most importantly, let the child know that no matter how much they scream and carry on, under no circumstances will they be allowed to get into the parent's bed. Again, when the child senses that they don't have an option – it's simply not going to happen – it's remarkable how quickly they give up the battle, and then everyone will get a good night's sleep. If one parent is being stubborn about this, and refuses to be firm with the child and continually gives in to the child, remind them that it will only take a few nights, if it's done properly, and this is much more preferable to being woken every night by the child sleeping in the parent's bed.

### **A REMINDER – No Options - The Most Important Factor of All**

At the risk of overstating the point – actually, it's impossible to overstate this point – if there is one thing that a parent takes from this manual and these strategies, it needs to be this. A parent must take away *all the other options*. Another way to look at this, and this is proven by the fact that it has worked for hundreds and hundreds of children with mild to severe

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sleeping problems, there is a direct relationship between how strongly the child gets the message that there are no longer any other options, and how quickly they end up sleeping through the night. When a parent 'sets it up' so well that the child simply *knows* there is no option, quite literally, they can be sleeping through the night within two to three nights. And interestingly, it's one area where the older the child is, the quicker it happens. With many child behaviour problems, the longer the behaviour has been a problem and the older the child, the longer it takes to fix. However, when it comes to sleeping problems, and when it comes to getting the message across that there is simply no other option, it's the opposite – this is because an older child can 'work it out' a lot quicker than there isn't an option. In other words, an older child will sense when the parent is serious about the new sleeping arrangements, and the consequences that will happen if the new arrangements aren't followed. The younger the child, the more likely they will need to 'test it out' before they discover that there are no other options.

### **The Consequences**

Consequences are vital because *it's the consequence* that takes away all the other options for the child. Quite literally, when the consequence is big enough, the child will realise that they must stay in their own bed, quietly, with nothing to do, until they go to sleep. This is by far the best way to get a child to settle quickly and fall asleep.

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Again, at the risk of overstating the point, for the consequence to be effective, it must be *of consequence* to the child – and it will need to be *major*, remembering that it has to outweigh being in the parent’s bed (or having the parent next to them to help get to sleep).

Below are some suggestions for consequences, but because every child is different, some consequences will be more effective than others. It’s also very important for the consequence to be do-able for the parent, as the more do-able it is, the more likely the parent will follow through, and the more likely the child will *know* that it’s going to happen.

Option 1 – Time off Bedtime Tomorrow Night. This is the ‘gentlest’ of options when it comes to consequences, and if the problem isn’t major, and if the child isn’t too strong willed, it may be effective. It simply needs to be explained to the child that if they are not lying in bed quietly at bedtime, time will be taken off their bedtime the next evening. In other words, if the child calls out, comes out, lies in bed and screams, plays with toys, reads books, kicks the wall etc., each time they do anything that isn’t lying in bed quietly, they lose an amount of time off their bedtime tomorrow night. Please note that it’s important for the parent to take an amount of time, say 10 minutes, each time the child does something wrong, rather than simply saying “you’re now going to bed early tomorrow night. The parent simply keeps adding up the time, and the child then goes to bed much earlier the next night. A word of caution however – if the child was to go to bed the next night

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much earlier, but then only carries on with the same behaviour, it actually won't end up being a very effective consequence, as the child isn't lying their quietly with nothing to do. In this situation, the parent will just end up repeating the process endlessly, and it won't solve the problem. If this occurs, please use one of the following options instead.

Option 2 – Shut the Door. This is by far the easiest option for the parent. It's based on the fact that most children don't like having their door shut when they're going to sleep. However, if your child doesn't mind having their door shut, then this option won't work. However, if your child hates the idea of their door being shut, it's the perfect consequence to use if they aren't lying in bed quietly. Simply state to the child that if they are doing anything apart from lying in bed quietly, their door will be shut, and it won't be opened again until they are lying in bed quietly. A word of caution with this approach is required - once you start this strategy, it's absolutely vital that it is 'seen through' to the end. In other words, no matter how upset or angry the child becomes, their door cannot be opened until they are lying in bed quietly. This is also a good time to remind parents that no matter how upset or angry the child becomes, they are not being traumatised in any way. In other words, the parent will not make things worse by sticking to the plan and seeing it through to the end. It needs to be remembered that a child won't be traumatised if what you are expecting them to do is completely reasonable – and staying in your own bed, in your own room, and go to sleep by yourself is what we expect of every child. Quite simply, no matter how

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upset the child becomes, it is not traumatising – they are simply very unhappy about not getting their own way. It is also important to remember that the clearer and more definite the message is that the child is not going to get their own way, the easier this strategy will work. When the child senses that the parent isn't going to give in, then the child will give up the battle much sooner.

A common problem with the strategy of shutting the child's door is when the child will then continually open their door and keep coming out. If this occurs, explain to the child that if they continue to come out, a lock will be fitted to their door and it *will* be locked, until they are lying in bed quietly. If this step is required, it will be important for the parent to follow through, and if the child's door needs to be locked, it just needs to be unlocked once the child is asleep, or when the child has agreed to lie in bed quietly. Many parents worry that this must be some form of child abuse – it's nothing of the sort, all the parent is doing is taking the necessary steps to control a child's behaviour. It needs to be remembered that if the child simply did as they were told in the first place, there would be no need for a lock, or for their door to be closed.

Option 3 – Any other type of consequence, *But It Must be Major!* In some instances, parents are unable to use the above options successfully. If this is the case, the parent will need to have another consequence on hand, however, as stated before, the consequence will need to be major, and the parent will need to be able to use it repeatedly. Some alternative

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consequences that are often used are banning the child from going somewhere on the weekend, or taking away their birthday party, however, a word of caution is required. These consequences are often not very effective, as once they have been taken away, the parent no longer has a consequence to use the next time the behaviour occurs. One possible example may be something such as sport practice, which may be a big enough consequence if the child absolutely loves playing sport. While this sounds harsh, it must be remembered that the only way to take away the options is to have a major consequence, and it must be *major*.

### **SUMMARY**

When it comes to children's sleeping problems, while there are many variations to the types of problems, it always seems to boil down to the one issue – the child has other options apart from lying in bed quietly. And without fail, when a parent makes it clear to the child that there are now no longer any other options, this is when the child will get to sleep the easiest. Therefore, only challenge remaining for the parent is how to take away all the other options. As discussed, the only thing that reliably works is having big enough consequences, as it's a big enough consequence that will make a child lie quietly in bed until they go to sleep.

### **What if This Doesn't Work?**

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If following the approaches and strategies in this manual hasn't proved successful, don't give up. There's more that can be done, it's likely the strategies just need to be tailored to your situation. And from following the above strategies, even if they haven't worked, there will be a better understanding of what else can be done. In the first instance, please feel free to contact Simon Beal by email to discuss any issues – [simon.beal@bigpond.com](mailto:simon.beal@bigpond.com).