

# Consistency is key for toddler's bedtime

**Yvette:**

How do I go about keeping my 3-year-old in his toddler bed? He has a global developmental delay and ataxia. He had been climbing out of his crib and getting stuck between the wall and the side of the crib, which is why I switched him to the toddler bed. He says that he wants to go to bed and will go into his room but won't stay in bed.

– Lisa

**Dear Lisa,**

I recommend you discuss this with your primary-care physician. I don't know if your child's inability to stay in bed is related to his illness or to his being age 3.

Dr. Nancy Cunningham, clinical director for Behavioral Health at Nationwide Children's Hospital, describes ataxia as a lack of coordination while performing voluntary movements. It may appear as clumsiness, inaccuracy or instability. Movements are not smooth and may appear disjointed or jerky. Ataxia may affect any part of the body.

There are many diseases that may lead to ataxia. Determining what disease is the cause for a particular child's ataxia can be very difficult and requires a careful series of steps planned by an experienced physician. Often, the diagnosis cannot be made immediately, but must await careful examination of the progression or resolution of symptoms over time. In some cases, however, it is important to make the diagnosis quickly so that treatment may be started before further damage occurs.

If your son's restlessness is not related to his illness, I recommend you establish a consistent bedtime and a bedtime routine that includes a winding down period about 30 minutes before bed. This can be a bath or a quiet activity — something to bring his energy level down.

Examine his nap schedule during the day to make sure he is not napping too late into the afternoon. Also, no television in his room before bed or to help him go to sleep. Put him in bed, read

him a book, tuck him in, turn out the light (it's OK to have a night light if he needs it) and walk away. Keep this routine every night. Repetition is important at this age.

If he gets out of his bed during the night, our experts suggest you do the following:

- Return him to bed right away.
- If he is afraid, find out why he is afraid. Do a monster check or turn on a night light, if needed, and reassure him you are right down the hall.
- If he cries or protests, wait a few moments and then check on him.
- If he continues to cry, wait a little longer each time between checks.
- Remind your child that it's time to go to sleep and if he is quiet you will come back in a few minutes to check on him.
- When he succeeds at staying in bed, praise him the next day and reinforce this positive development.

It is important that every time your son gets out of bed during the night that you return him to his own bed. It will make for some restless nights for you, but it's important that his behavior not be rewarded with getting to sleep in your bed. This is not an uncommon problem but one you can resolve.

Yvette

**Yvette:**

I am a father who is 1,000 miles from his oldest son, 9 years old. His mother removed him, traumatically, from my community where he was born and raised for 8 years. She left with her husband to join the military. Currently, she and her husband are living on a military base in Texas, while I and my wife and family live in Chattanooga, Tenn. Some background information on the mother: she is poorly educated, is a criminal and has not worked since she was pregnant with my son. I am a practicing physician who has two younger sons by my wife. Now that my oldest son is 1,000 miles from me, I have no control or ability to monitor his development, health or

educational achievements. His teachers communicate with me but do so with a sense of loyalty and fear of the mother. I keep in touch with my son through phone calls and letters. His mother is trying her best to alienate him from me. She does not encourage or allow him to call me. He has called one time since being in Texas for one year. I call several times per week and send letters, books and his needed items for school. Even with a court order, this woman will not comply or attempt to parent with me under these difficult circumstances. I have thought of taking him from her in a comparative fitness analysis, but my son is attached to his mother. I know he will be harmed in the long term by being in her custody, but I am ambivalent regarding that particular option.

My question: how can I be an influential parent under such circumstances and do you think I should pursue comparative fitness custody legal action? My background and lack of any negative background ensures an easy take away of my son, according to attorneys, but is this in his best interest? By the way, I am a pediatrician who specializes in adolescent medicine and developmental disorders, especially those of delayed cognition. As I mentioned previously, the mother is a high school dropout and has not attempted to do anything to improve her educational or career development. Thank you for any advice you can offer.

Jerome

**Jerome:**

Long distance parenting is tough when the other parent is uncooperative. I cannot advise you on whether you should seek physical custody of your son; only your attorney can advise you after understanding all the facts of your situation. As you indicated, however, a change of custody can be traumatic to a child. You have to weigh whether the benefits of a change of custody for your son outweigh the challenges. Moving your son so far from his mother to a new family will be a challenge for all of you, including your current wife. You must all be united in pursuing this course. You can also go to

court and ask for a modification of the parenting time order to provide more specific time, given the change in circumstances and your son living out of state. A new court order could define how frequently you can talk to your son and establish a routine parenting schedule that maximizes your son's out-of-school time by providing that summers and school breaks be spent with you. This is an easier option than going for full custody, but again, your attorney should advise you.

While you assess this option, consider setting up an e-mail account for your son and communicating with him in this manner. Send your son's mother a letter and tell her that you don't want to go to court but you insist on a relationship with your son. E-mail is a great way to stay in touch. You might also consider getting your son a limited-use cell phone so that you and he can talk on the phone without going through mom. However, this option must be with mom's permission. She may not support a 9-year-old having a cell phone. The reality is that you need to do something to fight for your time with him. Your son needs you and he needs to know that you want to be with him even if mom puts obstacles in the way. Since you have a new family, it can be very easy for your son to feel that he is not wanted anymore. No matter what obstacles mom puts up, you need to fight for some time with him, even if you have to get the lawyers involved. Mom needs to understand that a child benefits from a relationship with both parents. She is doing harm to her son by preventing his relationship with you.

Yvette

*E-mail your parenting questions to Yvette at: ColumbusParent@ThisWeekNews.com.*



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