

Ep #50: Sleep Training Part 2: Strategies for Older Kids



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Last week we talked about the bedtime process for a baby, but what does that look like when you have an older child and you want them to start falling asleep on their own in a bed? Stay tuned for our 50th episode where I'm going to tell you all about that.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello, and welcome back to *Parenthood Prep*. I have been working the last few nights with a couple of kiddos that I'm sleep training, siblings of three and five. And you know, a lot of people ask me, what's too old to sleep train? What's too young? What's the right age? And there really is no perfect moment, right? But there's lots of pros and cons to doing it at different ages.

And sometimes what happens is either your kids are sleep trained and they're doing great, but then they get a little older and they move to beds, or sometimes they were just never that great in the first place, like a baby that has to be rocked to sleep all the time or fed to sleep. You know, then that child moves to a bed when they're two or three and you end up having to lay with them to go to sleep and you just kind of get stuck in this routine.

So what happens with a lot of families, a lot of families that I've worked with, is that they get into this routine of falling asleep with the kids or laying with the kids while they fall asleep. And then the kids wake up in the middle of the night, of course, because they're humans and that naturally happens. And their parent is gone. So then they panic. So it's just like a baby falling asleep in your arms and waking up in the crib. We talk about this all the time.

So really the most important thing to do is to get them falling asleep independently. It is the cornerstone of everything. And you know a lot of people say, well, but that's fine. I don't mind laying in bed with them to fall asleep. It's nice. You know, maybe you didn't see them all day because you were at work.

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You know, maybe it doesn't take very long. Maybe you doze off yourself and you get a little rest time. And I love that for you.

You can still have a nice, lovely bedtime routine where you spend time together but then you teach your kid how to fall asleep independently and honestly it's giving them such a gift because you don't want them to be scared. You don't want them to be anxious, and I'll tell you they are more scared and anxious waking up to you gone when you were there when they fell asleep than they are in learning how to fall asleep on their own with you right outside their room or down the hall or whatever.

So I really want to talk about this and what it takes with older kids because last week we talked about with babies, you know, doing the bedtime. It's not easy, but it's very simple. You put them down in the crib awake. Where are they going to go? They may be upset. They may have some feelings, some frustration, but eventually they're going to figure out how to fall asleep.

And when you have an older child and that's in a bed, they can get out of the bed. They can get out of their room usually. I don't recommend locking them in unless it's a safety issue where they're at the top of the stairs or something like that. I would recommend putting in a gate but I don't think you should lock the door or anything unless there's like a major safety concern.

So we can't just leave them in there. They're going to come out of the room. They're going to do all these different things and we need to know how to respond to that in a way that's going to cultivate a new way of doing things.

So one of the biggest things I coach parents on is how do you hold yourself emotionally while you're having this back and forth with your child. So what I usually recommend is do your routine, bath, pajamas, brush teeth, read books, and then leave the room. I have a whole other episode about the bedtime routine and the bedtime cutoff and all that that you can listen to.

But when it's time to actually do the bedtime cutoff, what does that look like? If you're used to laying down with the kiddo and they're used to having you lay down with them and now suddenly you're not, you're going to tell them, I'm not

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laying down with you tonight. You're going to go to sleep by yourself like a big boy or big girl. I know you can do it. I have faith in you.

And then you're going to kiss them goodnight and get up and leave the room. And then what are they going to do? Are they just going to peacefully drift off to sleep? Would that that is what happened. That would be a dream. I would love to be able to tell you that's what's going to happen. But it's not. They're going to get up.

And so what I want to introduce you to today is a concept that I call the Robot Bus Driver. What happens when parents are trying to sleep train on their own or really do anything, sometimes change a behavior, or do anything with kids on your own, is that you have these just wildly swinging emotional states.

So maybe you start out calm, and then they get upset, and they get worked up, or they keep coming out of the room over and over and over and you keep walking them back in and tucking them back in and giving them a kiss and they get up again and it's over and over and finally it's like 9:00 at night and you flip out. You're just like, Jesus Christ, go to eff to sleep and then everybody's upset.

Or maybe you're really firm, maybe you're really strong, you're like, I'm going to be a drill sergeant and I'm just going to, you know, leave them and they're going to figure it out. I'm going to lock the door and they're going to cry and scream and I don't give a shit. I'm just going to be strong and they're going to figure it out.

And then after a while, it starts to get to you. And they're very sad and they're very upset and you can feel their emotions because you're their emotional thermostat. And you completely crumble and you just lose all your resolve and you rush in and you scoop them up and you're like, oh my poor baby, I love you so much and so sorry that I did this horrible thing to you.

And neither one of those responses are going to get you anywhere good nor are they going to teach your child any emotional regulation skills or, you know, set them up for success either with sleep training or as human beings in the real world.

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So when I'm telling parents to go through the stages of the bedtime routine, it's funny that I'm teaching you about human emotions and I'm telling you to pretend that you're not human, but just humor me for a minute. You are a bus driver and you are a robot and you have been programmed to drive the bus. You drive the bus to the different stops. You drive the bus to the bathtub, you drive the bus to the toothbrushing at the sink, you drive the bus to the bookcase and you pick up the books, and then you drive the bus to the bed, and then when that light turns on or the clock changes or whatever is your marker for the bedtime cutoff, you get back in the bus and you drive away.

Now the kid is going to say, well, I want to drive the bus. I want the bus to stay. But you're a robot bus driver. You don't understand these commands. You've been programmed. You're going to leave. And if the child wants to get back on the bus, they can't do that. They've been dropped off at their stop.

So if you think of yourself in that way, not as like a cold, calculating, does not compute child, although you could do that, it would be pretty funny and I think kids would get a kick out of it. You know, play around with it, see what happens. But the robot doesn't get upset that the child is trying to get them to do things that aren't in the program. The robot doesn't scream and yell. The robot doesn't, you know, melt into a puddle and say, oh, I'm so sorry, child. I shouldn't have been following my programming. The programming is the only thing the robot knows.

And so this helps you stay really even keel and really support your child through the feelings that they're going to be having. So you leave the room, you're standing outside the door, maybe the door's closed, maybe it's cracked, maybe it's open, maybe they have a gate, and I wouldn't stand where they can see you, but maybe they come to the door, they open the door, and you say, go back to bed, sweetie, it's time to go to bed. They'll do it. They may not do it right away. They'll do it eventually. Or maybe they'll lay on the floor.

You don't care. The robot doesn't care what they do. You just know that they are not allowed to leave the room. Once you've dropped them off at their stop, they are not allowed back on the bus. And that's it. You are just a calm, cool,

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collected robot bus driver. And what you're really doing here is setting boundaries.

This is something that we always talk about in life and in coaching and, you know, in therapy and all this. And what I always think of is, remember that scene from Seinfeld where Jerry rents a car, but then he goes to the car rental place and they don't have a car for him. And he's made a reservation. And they said that they took the reservation, but they didn't have a car available.

And he goes into this whole rant. I don't even love Seinfeld, but this is such a funny scene. He's like, anyone can take a reservation. You just take them. You just take, take, take. But you have to hold the reservation. That's the key piece. You have to be able to honor that reservation. You have to hold the reservation.

And in this case, what you have to do is you have to hold the boundaries. Anybody can set boundaries. Anybody can say, you know, I'm not going to lay in the bed with my child anymore. But when the rubber meets the road, you really have to be able to hold that boundary even when your child is begging you, not because it's what they need, but it's because it's what they're familiar with, what they're used to, and frankly, what they want.

I mean, who wouldn't want to fall asleep with you next to them? That sounds great. I love that. So when you're holding the boundaries, you don't want to, again, you don't want to get enraged and go high emotionally. You don't want to turn into a crumbling mush and go super low and melt emotionally. You want to stay right in the middle and hold that boundary like the robot bus driver.

I think I've told you about the family that I sleep trained a few years ago. I call them my magnum opus because I got there two and a half year old and infant twins all sharing a bedroom in a New York City apartment. I've done a lot of cool things.

That one is the one that I love pointing to as like, look what I have accomplished. It was tough going. But the first night we were sleep training the two and a half year old, the dad, oh, I've definitely told you this because I think I talked about him being a doctor. He's a doctor.

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You know, I said to him, you're going to tuck him in. You're going to say good night and then you're going to leave the room and he's going to get up and he's going to come out of the room and he's going to come to you and you're going to say, "Good night, sweetie. Go back to bed." And this might take two hours. You might do this for two hours where you are standing there telling him to go back to bed, reassuring him that everything's okay and that you're right down the hall or whatever, but you're not going to get into bed with him. And he's like, "Okay, I can do that."

So I'm in the other room with the babies and I hear this encounter happening and it seems pretty calm. The kid just keeps getting up. Then the dad says, "Go back to bed." The kid gets back in bed. Then a minute or two later, he decides that's a bad idea and he gets up again.

And again, I told the dad, this might take two hours. He might get out of bed a hundred times, but we are going to just keep sending him back to bed and telling him that he is doing a great job and we're so proud of him and we know that he can fall asleep on his own.

Five minutes later he comes into the room where I am with the babies and he says, "It's not working. He's already gotten up a few times." It's been five minutes. I was like, "Sir, sir, what did I say to you? How long is this going to take?" "Well, I don't know." I said, "How long did I say it might take?" "Oh, two hours." I said, "How many times might he get up out of bed?" He said, "A hundred times." This man is a doctor. But when it's your kid and when you're the parents and it's something you've never done before, you just feel so lost.

So anyway, it probably took 15 minutes, I think, the bedtime. The child eventually stayed in the bed and fell asleep on his own. He woke up during the night. I went in. We had another back and forth. By night three, he was sleeping through, and I think they've not had an issue since. I was texting with her the other day about something else and she was telling me how great all three of them still sleep.

So when you really hold that boundary, anybody can set one, you just set them. Once you hold the boundary, it's really, really simple to maintain that once

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you've established the structure. Now, I'm a little bit using boundaries in the wrong way here because boundaries don't normally mean controlling other people's behavior. They're about controlling your own behavior and then the other person having a response to that and you letting them have the response to that that they're going to have. And that is the case here with a child.

But when it is your child and you are trying to get them to do something different, we are in a way trying to control their behavior. But also, all we're doing is saying, I'm not going to lay in bed with you anymore. And also, you're not allowed to come out of the room. So I don't care if you fall asleep on the floor. I don't care if you read books in your bed. I don't care if you play with your stuffed animals. I don't really care if you jump on the bed, which is kind of a hot take that most parents would probably not love because you don't want your kids getting like all riled up.

But especially in those first few nights when we're doing sleep training, we just want them to fall asleep without us in the room. I don't care if that means they fall asleep in their beanbag chair. I don't care if that means like a little girl did one time. I think I've talked about this too, but I just freaking loved it. Two and a half years old, she's in a room learning how to go to sleep. She'd kind of gotten over the initial like crying and she was just puttering around her room goes over to her dresser. I'm watching this all in the video monitor takes out a new pair of pajamas changes her pajamas puts the old pair of pajamas back into the drawer.

I was like girl. Can you come over my house and do that for me? And just was, you know, perfectly happy to go to sleep like that. She might have changed her pajamas a few times. But, you know, it's like I think the parents get all this all wound up in like, well, what is she doing? Or like, oh, they fell asleep on the floor. Should we put them in the bed? No, they're allowed to make their own choices. And I promise you they eventually do end up sleeping in the bed. They always do. And if they don't, maybe the floor's more comfortable and who cares.

So when you are the robot bus driver, you have your boundaries programmed in. The robot bus driver does not stay at the bus stop with you. The robot bus

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driver doesn't let you get back on the bus after I've dropped you off at your determined stop. I mean, I guess maybe the robot pilot might be a better way to describe it, although flights don't usually have multiple stops, but it's like, no, you've gotten off the plane. You can't get back on, or you can't stay on the plane. The pilot's not going to sit with you on the plane after the plane lands.

And by being that calm, cool, collected, I see that you're frustrated, and I'm sorry to hear that, but you are going to fall asleep by yourself. I have confidence in you. I really trust that you can do this.

And then one other thing I want to add is that when I was talking about, you know, you go back in the room and you tuck them back in and you give them a kiss. Don't do that. I know it's really hard. I know you really want to. But then it just becomes a game of every time I come out of the room, they carry me back to my bed. They tuck me in. They give me a kiss. They, you know, answer my million questions. They get me water. They get me a tissue.

If you can't just send them back to bed and for whatever reason you have to walk them back to bed, like maybe they come down the hall to your bedroom or to the living room or something like that, be absolutely robotic. You are depositing them at the door of their room or you're depositing them in their bed, you are not turning it into another excuse to have more and more bedtime because all that's going to do is drag it out longer and make everyone more miserable.

I always feel like such a mean witch saying like, no, you can't give your kid another goodnight kiss. Or when they're in there, you know, trying to fall asleep and they're like, but mommy, I just want to tell you that I love you. I just want you to come in so I can give you a kiss and tell you I love you. Don't, no, don't do it. Do not do it.

Because you're going to go in, they're going to do that. They know what they're doing. I will tell you, your baby is not manipulating you. Your four-year-old absolutely is manipulating you. And they're just trying to get you back in the room because they want what they're used to and what they're familiar with. And

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it's your job as a parent and the gift that you can give them to maintain that boundary and not make it confusing for them.

So that's my recommendation on how to be the Robot Bus Driver. I would love to hear your questions. I have been getting a few more comments lately about the podcast and it's just so meaningful to me and I love it so much.

So if you care about me at all, no, if you want to do me a huge favor and just drop us a note, drop us an email, message us on Instagram @happyfamilyafter. Whatever you want to do, you can follow my personal account @Delvadean. You'll get lots of foster kitten content and me in crazy outfits. We're also leaving for a month to Asia so you get to see some travel pics. I would love that.

I would love to connect with more listeners. I want to know what you want to hear. I want to know what you like. And you know, what can I do for you? How can I help you even more? Have a great day, week, weekend, wherever you are. Talk to you soon.

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