

Can Bath Time Ruin Bed Time?

Bath time. It is almost a given that many families will include the bath at the end of the day, right before bedtime. We think of the warm water calming our children down and then peacefully drifting off to sleep. For some, this is their reality. For some, it happens once in a while. For some, this is a myth made up by someone who doesn't want them to have a peaceful bedtime.

Like all things, baths are no guarantee for a peaceful bedtime. But what surprises more people is that they are not only a guarantee, but may actually make bedtime harder when we do it too late in the day. There are several elements to bath time that are actually incompatible with a peaceful bedtime and good sleep, especially when children get older. It's important that families realize these so that if they start to see their bath times leading to not-so-peaceful-bedtimes, they may be able to pinpoint what it is that's happening and adjust accordingly. There are three main factors that seem to be at play: lights, stimulation, and temperature.

Lights

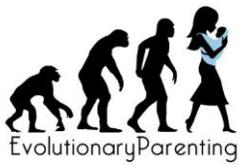
One of the main problems with bath time is the fact that, for most of us, our bathrooms are the lightest rooms in the house. Bright, white walls and lots of light are common in most bathrooms and very rarely do these bathrooms have dimmers or even options for different lights. It's often all-or-none and our kids get to enjoy a tub in the brightest environment.

The problem is that light is one of the things that actually impedes sleep for our children. Exposure to too much light before bed suppresses melatonin production which has impacts not only for bedtime, but also for the quality of sleep overnight. Research on toddlers and preschool children has found that if melatonin levels are not high enough when they go to sleep, children wake more frequently at night. Further, exposure to certain levels of light (1000 lumens to be exact, though more research is ongoing in terms of lower levels of light as that would still be more than a bathroom) lead to reduction of melatonin production by 80% and it takes more than an hour for children to recover from this.

For families who have dimmed their lights earlier in order to signal the production of melatonin only to go to the bright bathroom and see bedtime fall apart, the issue may be avoided by simply moving bath time earlier. No need to worry about the lights then. Of course, some consider just changing the lights to something less bright, but as you'll read below, there are still reasons to consider changing bath time.

Stimulation

While young babies lay peacefully in a bath which is similar to the womb, as children get older, the degree of sensory stimulation from a bath can be very high. If we think about the tactile stimulation from water alone, we can see why this might be a very energizing situation from a stimulation perspective. Of course, for young children, bath is all about play as well and so the bath gets the mind



going and imagination abounds as they explore all sorts of amazing things. (If you've ever watched a child pour water from container to container, you're watching a child learn about volume and conservation of matter - it's amazing!)

I know some people limit bath and play and that can be a solution, but I must admit that the degree to which children can explore and test various scientific principles in the tub is one reason why I think baths are wonderful for children and should be as long as the children would like. In many ways, the sensory stimulation from baths are also beneficial for children and can lead to overall better sleep. They just don't need to be right before bed.

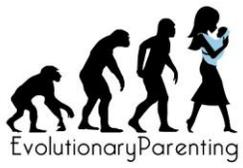
Temperature

In order for us to sleep well (and fall asleep), our core temperature drops. This is why many of us feel cold in the evening before bed. Now, a warm bath can actually be beneficial for sleep in time. That is, taking a warm or hot bath raises our body temperature then it drops when we exit. This drop can signal to the body to produce melatonin. However, we need melatonin to be produced for quite a while before we actually fall asleep; thus, if this is the first drop in temperature that leads to melatonin production, we will still need one to two hours afterwards to get our levels up high enough to be ready to sleep soundly. So while the warm bath can be excellent for sleep overall, in many cases with our children, we are actually not reaping the benefits of this due to the timing of when a bath occurs.

In summer when we take a cool bath, this can actually have the opposite effect as we cool down in the tub and then exit and our body temperature rises. Not what we need to sleep. Thus, we would need a warmer bath in summer so that our body temperature drops when we get out (or let our children air dry to allow them to cool through evaporation). In winter, we often try to avoid the cooling that happens after a tub which may also inhibit the production of melatonin (coupled with the lights). Additionally, although not all baths lead to wet hair and we often do our best to dry our kids' hair, but if there isn't enough time before bed to fully dry it, wet hair can lead to us getting too cold at night and thus inhibiting our ability to fall asleep or stay asleep.

Overall, a warm bath (regardless of time of year) is actually a good way to provide a lot of positive effects for our children. The issue comes down to timing. Children really do need at least 1-2 hours after a bath to reap the benefits for sleep (as their ability to produce melatonin after a disruption is limited compared to adults and adults need 1-1.5 hours after a warm tub). Many families find that moving the bath to before dinner or right after (depending on the child's bedtime) can result in easier bedtimes and better sleep for everyone.

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