

The Importance of Emotional Availability

Imagine the following scenario:

You finish dinner, start rushing to get the kitchen cleaned up, the kids in the bath, perhaps a bit of play time while you get everything ready for tomorrow, and then quickly get the bedtime routine going.

As usual, things fall apart. The kids get upset and refuse bed, you get frustrated and there's a whole lot of sighs, rolling of eyes, maybe even a yell or two during this time. After finally getting kids ready, you may have to lay in bed with them, but your brain is now thinking of all the other things you have to do and as the minutes tick by, you can feel your own frustration and anxiety rising.

'Why won't this kid sleep?!'

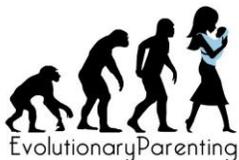
In the meantime, your child is crawling over you, asking for more stories, nursing non-stop (if you're nursing), or tossing and turning, seemingly unable to fall asleep. By the time your child goes to sleep, you're so spent and stressed out that everything seems impossible.

Sound familiar? For many families, this is a reality night after night. Families struggle so much with 'resistance' at bedtime and it can feel like no matter how great the day was, it ends on a sour note. Parents start to consider how to get their kids to go to sleep more independently so they can get things done and sleep training often enters the conversation. It often doesn't help that with toddlers and older we seem to expect much more independent sleep (despite the fact that evidence suggests our children's need for us at night actually increases in these years). We know that life would be better if our kids just could sleep on their own.

Right?

No. I mean, maybe it would, but that's not the reality we need to be pushing here. In fact, the missing piece for so many families is actually what researchers have called Emotional Availability. Briefly it refers to our ability to be present with our kids without letting all the other distractions creep in. For those that practice meditation or mindfulness, you might hear of people talking about 'holding space' for those around us. In practice, it's the ability to let go of all the other things surrounding you so you can focus on being with your kids, whether it's playing, reading a book, or just laying there with them as they try to drift off to sleep.

You see, researchers have found that children whose parents are emotionally available at nighttime actually sleep better and resist sleep less than those whose parents are less or not emotionally available.



This shouldn't be too surprising if we think about what it means to be in the presence of someone who is there or not there, especially when that person is a parent.

Let us take the child's perspective from the scenario above:

After a full day, the child is probably feeling a bit overwhelmed, as many kids are by the end of the day. Being rushed through things in the evening often feels like more is coming at her than she can handle, but as everyone seems somewhat angry, she stays quiet, not wanting to provoke anyone. She doesn't know what's wrong, but can feel it. After all, she's been honing these skills for thousands of years, skills that allow her to emotionally read the people closest to her in the most primitive sense. When they are calm and relaxed, she knows she's safe, but if they are on edge and maybe even angry, she knows something is wrong and her brain will only register this as being a threat, possibly to her survival.

When feeling this stressed, she instinctively aims to stay close to her parents, refusing the one act that might lead to danger or separation - sleep. She clings, she talks, she nurses, all looking for a sense of safety that will allow her to calm enough to go down. Eventually she just gets tired enough that her body succumbs to sleep; however, because she was on edge, she's actually going to be more likely to wake up during the night too, just to make sure she's still safe.

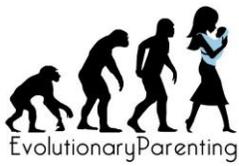
As you can see, the issue is not that your child is trying to make life harder for you, but rather that their experience of your emotional state is critical to their own emotional experiences. This is why children who have someone who is emotionally available before bed often sleep better (all else being equal - and that's a lot of 'all elses') than those who don't.

So what are the ways that we can use this information to help us at bedtime? I recommend trying some or all of the following strategies if you find that you are at a point of having bedtime difficulties or see yourself in the first scenario.

1. Carve out 'me time' before the evening routine begins. This is not an hour of uninterrupted time for you, but sometimes as little as 10-15 minutes just to breathe and help yourself gain perspective before embarking on the rest of your evening. You may meditate, take a hot shower, do a bit of yoga, read a book - whatever. The goal is to get yourself in a good state of mind and let go of whatever negativity you've had that day.

2. Be realistic. More often than not, our stress in the evenings comes from having unrealistic expectations about what we will achieve and when. If you are regularly finding that you're rushing nonstop to get more stuff done then take a look at what you're expecting to get done and when and cut back somewhere. Yes, dishes need doing, but maybe that can wait till morning?

3. Look at bedtime. One of the biggest problems that sends us into a spiral is trying to enforce a bedtime that simply isn't meshing with our child's biology and this means it takes longer to get to sleep and more battles for everyone. Research on toddlers has found that on average bedtime is around



8:30pm, much later than what families aim for. In many Asian countries, bedtimes are closer to 9:30-10pm. I'm not saying it needs to be that late, but if you can let go of a 7pm bedtime, lots of problems may be alleviated.

4. Balance self-and child-time in the evening. In the evening, most people find it easiest to have that quality, emotionally available time if they have accomplished some of the things they need to do. Combined with point 3 on bedtimes, if you can look at your evening and think about pushing bedtime back even just 30 minutes and using part of that time to get what's most important done and then blocking off 15-30 minutes to be one-on-one with your child before bed, you will likely be more able to keep this as a sustainable routine. We are more emotionally available when we aren't stressed so removing whatever is the big stressor at a certain point can allow us to step back and be with our kids as they need us. This means giving them time to just play themselves while we address our stress and then making sure to give them that quality time before bed to let them know they are safe and secure. And when that big thing is done, you can also lay down with your child knowing that if you're there for longer than expected, it's okay.

I can tell you from experience that when families find a way to make their evenings less hectic and be more available to their children and themselves, they often find that at least some of their sleep problems start to disappear on their own. We have to feel safe to sleep and there is nothing more important to our children than the subtle cues of safety that we send them so working on that will never be a lost cause.

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