

The Bedtime Pass: Good or Bad?

The bedtime pass, something that has been hailed by "experts" as the answer to all parents' sleep problems for their toddlers and beyond. Those pesky kids just don't want to go to sleep when told. They ask to get up a million times, whether it's for water, to go pee, for a hug, a nightmare, and so on. As parents, we are told this is "bad" and indicative of a "problem". This is most common in that toddler to early elementary school age and it drives parents crazy.

The bedtime pass is supposed to alleviate that. It provides children with "control" in that they are given one pass that they can use at night to get up. Need to pee? Use the pass and parents won't get upset. But - yes, there's a 'but' - once that pass is used, it cannot be used again.

If, like me, you wonder, "What if the kid needs to pee again?" you are entering the crux of the debate. Let us dive in.

Why is this deemed good?

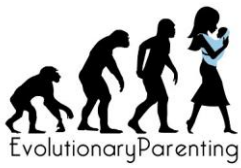
The bedtime pass is thought to be "good" because it provides some control to children so they can decide when they really need to get up instead of getting up all the time. In one sense, there is a sound logic to this. You see, when children - heck, humans - know we are allowed to do something, the urge to do it lessens. Think about going on a diet; the moment you cut something out it becomes that much more tantalizing simply because you can't have it. In theory, this tells children they can have it which means they won't want to have it as much as before. In fact, in many cases, families report "success".

Problem #1: More than one reason

Despite the one element that actually has some logic to it, overall the bedtime pass is - in my opinion - quite problematic. One of the first issues that it has is that it provides one pass that is supposed to last all night. Yet, many children can have multiple things that require getting up. For example, I will get up several times a night to pee, fill my water glass, walk around if my back hurts too much, get up if I've had a nightmare, and so on. We would have a very wet bed and I would have a very crummy sleep if I was only allowed out of bed once per night. Our children are the same. This doesn't mean every night, but many nights children will have something more that needs some assistance or leaving the room. As you can see, these passes lump things together and include both the biological (bathroom and drink) and the psychological (kiss/cuddle from mom/dad). Yet our children often need both throughout the night at multiple points.

Problem #2: Children don't get any nuance

I have heard many families suggest that the pass is not intended to keep kids in their room if they have had a nightmare or "really" need to go pee and so on. In most cases, parents are clear that they



wouldn't actually get mad at their child if he or she got up for a snuggle and kiss after a nightmare or they heard their child going pee at night. The problem is that children often don't understand this nuance and depending on the child's temperament or trust in their parent's response, this can be a much larger problem. Of course some kids will get up and risk it and learn that their parents won't get angry and it's okay. However, I have spoken to adults who had a similar system as children who didn't. Adults who were too afraid to get up when they were sick. Adults who struggled through nightmares because they felt they couldn't get out. Adults who sat awake at night after peeing the bed because they didn't feel they could get someone (and some who then got in trouble for peeing the bed).

You may suggest this is just "harsh" parenting, but the adults don't remember it that way. It was just a matter of how things were. You didn't get up at night and that was that. In many cases, adults couldn't tell me what it was that would have happened had they gotten up, but in a child's mind, it was enough that it wasn't allowed to force compliance. This is not uncommon because if we think about how children comprehend their world and us, we are asking them not to trust us in order to learn the nuance. We're telling them one thing (you have a pass that you can use once and that's it) and then expecting them to do something else (if you really need to get up, just do it). It simply doesn't work that way.

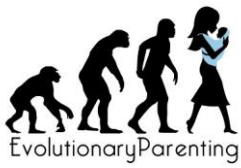
Problem #3: It ignores the actual reasons for getting up

Like so many things with modern parenting, we are looking to treat a symptom instead of the cause. Why would a child feel the need to get up so much to receive comfort or avoid sleep? Well, in most cases, it's actually quite biologically normal at this stage.

First, this is the age when nightmares and other social struggles begin. Our children are learning how to work with others, socialize with others, are often in daycare or school (which is a huge transition), and their brains can have trouble taking it all in. This means fear of being alone, fear while sleeping, and so the child looks to their safety net for support. Only now the parents are saying that support isn't available. Contrast this with Sweden where a longitudinal study found that bedsharing actually increased year by year from age 1 to 5 before starting to decrease again and parents were simply accepting it and thinking of things from the child's perspective. Parents accept this higher needs period as they realize how much is going on for their kids.

Second, in order to sleep well we have to feel safe, regardless of what else is going on, and our parents help us feel safe. Even when children are in their own room, they will feel safer if a parent is there to help them fall asleep. The pass presupposes we are asking our children to lay down in a dark room by themselves and not be scared and simply fall asleep without help. This is not how young children have fallen asleep throughout human history and is still not how they fall asleep in many other cultures. Requiring a parent to take a moment to sit or lay down with them as they drift off is very normal.

Third, bedtimes may be off. We have research suggesting our younger children are being "put to bed" far earlier than their biology would dictate and this has direct implications to bedtime resistance and wakings at night. If a child is needing to get up a lot, it may indicate that he or she simply isn't ready for



bed. And that's okay. Just push bedtime a bit later and you may have a child falling asleep within minutes.

What to do instead?

Although the logic at the beginning was sound, imagine if a child knew that they had support each time it was needed and parents actually listened to what they had to say about sleep. You would then you really would see a child who could stay in bed and fall asleep independently when he or she was developmentally ready. The pass attempts to force a child to reach this level of maturity and development earlier than kids are actually ready and it's unclear what effect this has on their sense of security and safety. Obviously many children will be okay, but some of those I've spoken to talk about these experiences as if it was traumatic. That's not okay. We are risking harming our children for the benefit of an extra 15 minutes or so without them at night.

If you have a child that is strongly resisting sleep, take a moment to see what your child is trying to tell you. Is she scared? Lonely? How much time have you spent with your child that day? When kids are in out-of-home care, they can miss their parents enough and feel the need to be close to them more than when they weren't in such situations. Help your child process his day by talking to him about what happened and any strong emotions he may have felt. You can even do this with pre-verbal children by just talking about what they did and putting things in context.

And most importantly, don't be afraid of laying down with your children for a snuggle to help them fall asleep at night. That is normal and often just what the child needs for a good sleep. The worst thing that happens is that you fall asleep too.

Tracy Cassels, PhD is the Director of Evolutionary Parenting, a science-based, attachment-oriented resource for families on a variety of parenting issues. In addition to her online resources, she offers one-on-one support to families around the world and is regularly asked to speak on a variety of issues from sleep to tantrums at conferences and in the media. She lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two children.