

# Behavioral insomnia of childhood (BIC)

## SLEEP CENTER

**Behavioral insomnia of childhood** is an exaggerated aspect of normal psychological development. It happens when children first realize they are separate from mom or dad and this can be scary to them. If they are used to always falling asleep with mom or dad nearby, they cannot figure out how to calm down without those comforts. We all wake up a little in between sleep cycles. This can be 6 times per night for a child. If they wake up in the middle of the night, normally, and they cannot soothe themselves back to sleep without you, they will cry or come to find you. BIC is normal and correctable.

- Your child **can** develop the ability to self-soothe at night and go back to sleep on their own.
- It is important they fall asleep on their own. It is an **ESSENTIAL** skill for them to develop to be a successful child and adult.
- Independence at bedtime is important for them (and for you!)

The strategies to correct this behavior depend on what your child is doing, their age and what they are seeking at night (do they want *you* or just more time)

For **bedtime refusal** (aka. “I need another glass of water,” “one more book,” etc...) OR being unable to fall asleep without you, here are some ways to get them to sleep alone and go to sleep faster:

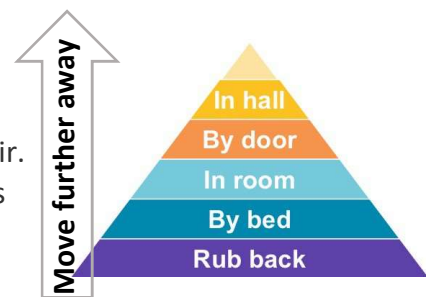
**Bedtime passes:** If your child delays bedtime for hours, give them three bedtime passes. Tell them it’s ok to get out of bed for another book or hug or glass of water. Each time they get up, take one of their passes. When they run out of passes, they cannot get out of bed anymore. If they do, ignore them. Let them cry it out. Do not pay any attention to them. Even yelling at them will be attention and will reinforce the behavior.

**Checking-in method:** leave your child alone in his or her bed to fall asleep but check on them at longer and longer intervals: 1 minute, 2 minutes, 3 minutes, and then every 5 minutes until they fall asleep.

- When you check, the interaction should be very brief and without physical contact.
- Say something reassuring and simple: “It’s night-night time. I love you. I’ll see you in the morning”.
- Reward them each time with positive reinforcement: “I am proud of you.”
- Slowly move the intervals to longer and longer until they fall asleep without you.

**“Camping out”:** a gentle sleep training method consisting of gradually withdrawing your presence from your child’s room at bed time.

- Put them to sleep in their own bed alone
- Lay near their bed but not in it. Can be next to them on the floor or in a chair.
- When your child reaches for you, provide short reassurance: “I love you. It’s time to go to sleep. Good night.”
- Do or say the same thing **EVERY** time.
- Every 1-3 nights, you move further and further away until you are outside of their room.
- Will regress with any stress (illness, life event). You should be able to move away faster when you have to restart the process.



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**“Excuse me” method:** the parent who usually stays with the child will say, “Excuse me, I need to step out and \_\_\_\_\_ for a second. I’ll be right back!” The excuse should be boring that the child does not want to do like “take out the trash.”

- Then you leave after making the excuse.
- At first you will come back in very frequently— every few seconds on the first night.
- When you come back, you praise your child for staying in their bed and acting brave, etc.
- Over several nights, you reduce the frequency of checks. What makes this gentle is that you are not allowing your child to stress or be alone for more than a few seconds at first.

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For the child that **gets out of bed** in the middle of the night (or wakes up crying and won’t go back to bed) and comes into another family member’s bed:

*If < 3 years old and/or in a crib:*

- Make sure you always put them to bed awake and drowsy, not fully asleep
- DO NOT take them out of the crib to rock them when they wake up in the middle of the night. Just rub their back or soothe them from outside of the crib.
- DO NOT return to their room every time they cry or call out. They can eventually calm and go back to sleep on their own.
- Try the “Camping out” method above
- Avoid co-sleeping in your bed with them

*If >3 years old and in their own bed:*

**Develop a rewards program:** create a sticker chart with stars or smiley faces with days of the week. Every day that your child stays in their own bed all night, they get a sticker. Provide a very exciting reward for them at the end of a period of time, like a week. But it has to be something they REALLY want and they would not get normally.

**Ignore them:** *NOTHING* is more reinforcing for a child than parental attention (good or bad). Every time they get up return them back to their bed without looking at them or hugging them or giving them any positive or negative feedback. Do not give in. They will only remember the one time you let them into your bed!

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>👤 All caregivers have to be on the same page and be <b>consistent</b>.</li><li>👤 Make sure everyone in the house is prepared for a brief disruption (like loud crying).</li><li>👤 Children are stubborn and can cry for hours, even throw up. <u>This is normal.</u></li><li>👤 It can take time. Be patient.</li><li>👤 A few bad nights of sleep now will pay off with a better sleeping household in the future!</li></ul> |
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*If you are **consistent**, your child should be sleeping better **within a week**.  
Remember, things get worse right before they get better.*

***Don’t give up!***