emoGlow · Scripts

When bedtime turns into chaos · Ages 2–4

What to say at bedtime when your three-year-old wants more stories

"Bedtime is chaos and different every night. My three-year-old is bouncing on the bed yelling for more stories. What do I say right now?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Okay! Bed in 60 seconds. GO!"

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I know you really want to hear more stories, and I love that you enjoy them. But it's time for bed now."

"Okay! Bed in 60 seconds. GO!" works in meetings. On a three-year-old it can work like a starting gun. The sentence you need is slower, and the bigger change is not tonight's words but tomorrow's: the same steps, in the same order, again.

Why more routine nights went with better sleep

In a study of more than ten thousand young children under five, across thirteen countries and regions (funded by Johnson & Johnson, which sells bedtime products; one author was a company employee and three others, including the lead author, had been consultants or speakers for the company), mothers reported how many nights a week the family ran a bedtime routine and how their child slept. The more nights a week a routine happened, the better the reported sleep: earlier bedtimes, falling asleep faster, fewer night wakings and longer sleep overall. It is a cross-sectional, parent-reported study, so it shows a link, not proof of cause, and it says nothing about any single night.

The NHS gives the same advice for young children: a calming, predictable routine at the same time, including the same things every night.

What the words do

Take 2 has three parts. "I know you really want to hear more stories" names what your child wants. "I love that you enjoy them" says the wanting is fine. "But it's time for bed now" is the limit, said calmly, without a countdown. Then offer one final story, their pick from the shelf, so there is a choice inside the limit rather than a negotiation about the limit.

The routine is the real script. Pick three or four steps, bath, pajamas, one story, lights, and run them in the same order tonight and again tomorrow, even on the nights you are late home.

See your pediatrician or GP for loud snoring, breathing pauses, or sudden changes in sleep.

If you live in two homes

The steps can travel even when the rooms do not. Bath, pajamas, one story, lights: the same order can run in both homes. If you share one thing with the other adult, share the order of the steps, not the bedtime. If the other home does bedtime differently, your routine is still yours to run on your nights.

In the UK

The NHS page on sleep and young children describes the same thing: a calming, predictable routine at the same time, including the same things every night. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children. For everyday parenting questions, ask your health visitor, or call Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222), free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. Mindell, J. A., Li, A. M., Sadeh, A., Kwon, R., & Goh, D. Y. T. (2015). Bedtime routines for young children: A dose-dependent association with sleep outcomes. Sleep, 38(5), 717–722. Industry-funded study (Johnson & Johnson).
2. NHS (2023). Sleep and young children.
3. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 3, 2026.
4. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
5. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
6. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 3, 2026.
7. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 4, 2026.

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.