emoGlow · Scripts

When you know what to do, but not at 6 pm · Ages 5–7

What to say to your five-year-old on a night you have nothing left

"I know exactly how I'm supposed to handle my five-year-old at bedtime. By six in the evening I can't do any of it. What do I say on those nights?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Tomorrow I'll just try harder."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I'm tired tonight. I had a long day at work. So it's eggs on toast, and you can eat in your pyjamas."

Good advice doesn't fail at six because you're a bad parent. It fails because it asks for your best at the hardest hour of your day. So don't count on trying harder at six: decide at four.

What is known, and at what age

In two week-long diary studies, mothers and fathers were more pressuring with their children than their own usual on the days they felt more stressed or low. In one, the children noticed it too. Parents filled in the diaries; nobody watched them, and which came first is unknown. The children were six to twelve (one study was of six- and seven-year-olds); nothing here is specific to five-year-olds.

Across hundreds of experiments, people who decided in advance, "if this happens, I'll do that," followed through more often than people who only meant to. The gain is small. It has barely been tested on parenting.

What the words do

Take 2 asks less of the evening, out loud: a reason that is not your child, what happens next, and nothing asked of her. It is for the odd bad night, not every night.

These words are everyday practice, not research findings. The American Academy of Pediatrics says a parent can give themselves a time out when they feel out of control, once the child is in a safe place.

Everything here is about ordinary tiredness, the kind that comes and goes. If it's most days for two weeks or more; if the short fuse is there all day and not just at six; if you feel flat, or far from your children, or you catch yourself wanting to get away; talk to your doctor. That is what they're for. And if you're ever frightened of what you might do, don't wait.

If you or a child are in danger, contact emergency services (911 in the US, 999 in the UK). US: call or text 988 for crisis support, any time. US: parents can call or text the National Parent & Youth Helpline, 1-855-427-2736, any time. UK and Ireland: Samaritans, 116 123. Elsewhere: findahelpline.com.

If you live in two homes

In your home you may be the only adult, so there is often nobody to hand over to. Then your one minute is the hand-over: your child stays safe and in sight, or comes with you, hand in hand. Keep the tiredness line about you and your day, never about the other home, and never ask your child to carry it there.

In the UK

The NHS says to see a GP if you have symptoms of depression for most of the day, every day, for more than two weeks. 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, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential; in Scotland, Children First, 08000 28 22 33. Worried about a child's safety: NSPCC, 0808 800 5000 (weekdays 10am–4pm). If anyone is in danger, call 999. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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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.