

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #145: The Bedtime Struggle is Real: One Tool to Help Your Child Stay in Bed

Mallory: When we were going through times of challenging sleep, definitely had those feelings of like, we're never going to make it out of this sleep struggle. It's always going to be this way. I'm never going to be well rested.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Mallory: I once worked with a family who was frustrated over their ADHD child's Jekyll and Hyde personality. Most of the time, their child was a sweet, happy kid, but at the smallest request, he could flip to an hour-long meltdown. After walking on eggshells for years, the whole family was super stressed, and his parents found themselves arguing constantly about how to best discipline him.

Katie: If you can relate to this family's situation, you are not alone.

Lori: That's why we created our online course, *Creating Calm*, to give you practical strategies to address challenging behaviors that are incredibly common in ADHD.

Mallory: And as a bonus, these tools will help the whole family get on the same page so there's less arguing in your home.

Katie: Here's what Kate had to say after taking the course, "Creating calm has helped me really understand ADHD and given me so many practical tools to support my son and make our days not such a battle. I've read so many books, but they just didn't give real life examples and tools. This course has been so worth the investment and something I'll keep coming back to revisit."

Lori: A year from now, you're going to wish you had started today. Head to thechildhoodcollective.com/yes and enter the exclusive code **PODCAST** to get 10% off our course when you enroll today. You can also grab the link and code in the show notes.

Katie: Today we are talking about something that can bring up all the feelings, challenges at bedtime.

Mallory: After working with a lot of families and as a parent myself, I have seen that bedtime struggles are so common and this is especially true for our kids with ADHD.

Lori: Yeah, and it's one of the things that I always talk about with parents when I'm doing my ADHD evaluation so I hear all the sleep stories, and a lot of people don't realize that difficulties with sleep can actually make those ADHD symptoms a lot worse.

Katie: Yes. It's such a cycle. ADHD makes it harder to fall asleep or stay asleep, and then the lack of sleep just makes all their symptoms worse the next day. And since the three of us talk to each other all the time, I feel like I actually know a lot about each of our bedtime ups and downs over the years, and there's been quite a few. One of my personal favorites was my own son. It's funny now, but it was not funny at the time. And I'm not a child psychologist, right? So I did not understand how to manage this. So he tells me he was probably, like, about two, and he's like, I want to leave my door open at night. And of course, a child psychologist would know that this is like a slippery slope, but I'm the cool mom and I work on speech and language, so I'm like, yeah, let's leave your door open. And so for a couple of nights, that was fine, I would just crack it. And then he started to want it open a little more and open a little more. And then he started to realize that he could see me from his crib. He could look down the hallway and actually see if I was sitting, because apparently, I'm also a creature of habit. And as soon as I would put him down, I would go sit in the same spot on the couch. And he could just see, like the corner of my head from where he was. And so that little stinker would watch me, and if I would get up, he would say, mama, sit down. All of a sudden, I'm like, this

is actually not working at all. And what was like, I'm just going to leave the bedtime door cracked turned into me being basically held hostage on the couch for 40 minutes or whatever. And so I feel like just personally, we've all had those moments of like, how did I get here?

Lori: Yeah. And actually, my kids have always slept with a door open. So if your kids sleep with a door open, I have very anxious kids at night and they get scared very easily. So we always leave the door cracked. We always have, and my daughter, the issue that we've always had sleep issues, Katie knows because we nanny shared. That's how we kind of first met. We nanny shared with our kids for the first year, and we'd be like, sleep training together. And she knows about, my oldest has always had sleep challenges. Again, it's the nighttime anxiety that we have issues with. So I remember we've gone through all kinds of different things where she would be getting out of bed like 100 times to ask questions. I need some water, like lots of bedtime stalling. But again, really wanting to check on me, similar to your son, and make sure I was still out there and, all the questions. And it would make bedtime, it would be like an hour and a half after I put her down. And we're dealing with this and it's so exhausting. Or the opposite was, okay, I don't want you out of bed, so I'm going to check on you. Okay, check on me in two minutes. So then I'm having to check on her every two minutes for how long? It's exhausting. And all you want to do, you're exhausted from a whole day of seeing other people's kids and then coming home to your own kids, dealing with that, you just want some downtime and it's so hard.

Mallory: I know that we went through our phases of sleep struggles and I honestly don't remember all the details. I probably blacked it out.

Katie: That's a good strategy. I like that.

Lori: That is. Yeah.

Mallory: But I do remember the feeling. And when we were going through times of challenging sleep, definitely had those feelings of like, we're never going to make it out of this sleep struggle. It's always going to be this way. I'm never going to be well rested. But then I remember the distinct feeling of having a moment where I'm like, sleep has been good for the past two, three weeks. And so if you're in a position right now where you feel like you're never going to sleep again, it feels like there's no end in sight, I just want to encourage

you that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Sleep can get better. With the acknowledgement that this is really challenging, especially for kids with ADHD.

Katie: It really is and we've been there. So now that we've really established ourselves as the credible sleep experts that we are, I'm so glad that all of our kids would never have any sleep issues. Today I'm going to actually interview Lori and Mallory. So they are both child psychologists and we're going to talk all about a strategy that they often recommend to families. And let me just say, I'm here for all your sleep tips, ladies, so whatever you have. So I wanted to start with a quick overview. What would you say are some of the most common sleep challenges that we often see in kids with ADHD?

Mallory: Yeah. And sleep is one of those earliest signs of ADHD that parents are reporting to us that the research is finding is that very early in childhood, kids who eventually get a diagnosis of ADHD are struggling with sleep. This is hard for kids with ADHD, and one of the biggest things that we see is that kids with ADHD have a hard time winding down for bed. They have a lot of energy. They have a hard time shutting off their brain, slowing down their body, and getting ready to go to sleep. They're getting out of bed a lot. They are waking up early, earlier than parents want them to wake up before we really think they've had enough total sleep time to be fully rested. They're waking up in the middle of the night and getting out of bed. Parents find themselves in a situation where they're having to lay next to their child until their child is asleep. They might be having to sleep in their child's bed the whole night, or maybe the child is sleeping in their bed all night. Parents have tried hundreds of systems to figure out what works, and they're feeling stuck. But this is really one of the earliest signs that we see in families that have kids that eventually get a diagnosis of ADHD.

Lori: Yeah. And this affects us so much as parents because, again, like I said, we need time at night to reset and relax and if we're with our kids the whole night, we're not getting that. And then we're depleted in the morning, and don't have the energy, to deal with all the things.

Katie: Yeah. And I want to caveat, too. I know that there's probably people listening who are like, I'm fine with my kids sleeping in my bed, and I really enjoy that time, and that's totally fine. Okay, so if that is where you're at and that's culturally really important to you, first of all, you are a better person than I am because I'm like, I would like to watch non kid tv, like junk tv at night. But I want to say in this case, we're really talking to families who are like, I don't like it. I don't like that I have to lay in my child's bed or check on them 37 times and

that they're watching the clock to make sure I'm here after every three minutes. So again, no judgment at all. If this is what works for you, that's fine. Really this is something that can be a problem for some families. It can strain your adult relationships and can just be really challenging. So if that's the case, that's kind of who we're talking to right now. And so the strategy that we're specifically going to talk about today is really focused on tackling the bedtime specifically. So not necessarily the early morning wake ups. That's a different issue. We're going to interview you guys about that next because I still struggle with that at my house. But I do have some ideas and I've tried many things, so we'll talk about that later, another day. But, really thinking about those times that you put your child to bed and they just keep getting up and it's like you're stuck in this loop. So tell us about what you recommend to families who are dealing with this and really want that to change.

Mallory: Absolutely. So the strategy we're going to share today is the bedtime pass. And the bedtime pass is a science backed strategy that we recommend to a lot of families. And it's basically kind of a get out of bed free card that you give your child, at bedtime. And we love this strategy because it really gives kids the security that they're looking for while still providing and setting boundaries and limits around those seemingly constant bedtime curtain calls that I like to call them. And it also teaches your child to fall asleep without you having to lay next to them every night.

Katie: Okay. I love it, and I think it sounds so counterintuitive. So to keep our kids in bed, we're going to give them a bedtime pass to help them get out of bed. You have to explain more about this. Okay. So how does it actually work?

Lori: Yeah, so we recommend giving kids actual physical passes. So we tell people, you can just cut up pieces of paper, you can have your child make some of these. We want to give them three, to start out with. So don't do one or two because sometimes that's not quite enough. We want them to feel successful with the system. And again, when your child is getting up 122 times a night, three can feel like, oh, my gosh, how is that going to work? But we do recommend, starting with three, and it's like a physical kind of coupon almost that they take with them to bed. My daughter liked to keep hers under her pillow, and ours said one free pass for a hug, kiss, drink or question. And again, you can change this based on the things that your child is asking for at night. My daughter was like, she's very curious and just

has like a million questions at night, so hers were almost always a question and a kiss. She would sneak in both simultaneously.

Katie: Yeah, they're good at that.

Lori: Yeah. It's an actual physical kind of pass that tells them what they have. They take it to bed. They can put it next to their bed on the floor, or by their pillow on the bedstand.

Katie: Okay, so what if I don't have a piece of paper? Like, what if I'm listening and I'm like, yeah, I'm going to try this, but I can't picture it. I'm not even sure what that might look like.

Mallory: So we actually have an example of a pass. If you want to steal our example, we have it in a blog post. We'll link that in the show notes for you. So feel free to grab that or use that as an example.

Lori: Yeah, that's from our online course, *Creating Calm*. It's a little freebie from the course that you can have.

Mallory: And so, like Lori was saying, you can make a bedtime that is cute and it says bedtime pass on it and it says, like, good for one free hug, one free kiss, one free drink, one question. But it doesn't have to be a pass either like a physical, pass. You could use anything, essentially, that is safely put under your kids pillow or on their bedside table. A popsicle stick, some kind of token, just some kind of physical, tangible representation of this get out of bed free.

Katie: Okay. I like it.

Mallory: And another thing to keep in mind, too, is that when your child is using the pass, they're getting out of bed, they're coming to you, they're actually making this exchange with you. They're giving you the pass, and then they get to ask their question. You're keeping that pass. Once they've used it, it's gone. And then at that point, they've used their pass. They need to go back to bed.

Lori: For my kids, the last thing they want to do when they get home from school is homework.

Katie: Totally and the last thing I want to do after a long day of work is deal with the stress of meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning up the kitchen.

Lori: Same here. We tried Hungryroot grocery service to help us eat balanced meals while saving time and money every week. It's been a game changer for our weekly meals and snacks, and I love that you can customize groceries based on your kids or your family's dietary restrictions.

Katie: Yes! My husband eats gluten free and I love that I can customize groceries based on our family's needs. And not only can I get complete meals delivered, but I can also order my weekly groceries through them. And I'm always amazed at how my kids will try new things just because they came out of our Hungryroot box.

Lori: Yes! It's easy to customize your box each week and you can skip weeks whenever you want. For a limited time, Hungryroot is offering our listeners 40% off your first box, which is amazing. Just be sure to use the code: CHILDHOODCOLLECTIVE40 so you can get the discount.

Katie: We also have the link and the code in the show notes, so you can try Hungryroot today.

Lori: Over the past year, my oldest has really struggled with anxiety, especially at night. As soon as it was time for sleep, she'd be crying for me to stay and worrying about all the things. I was talking to another therapist about our bedtime battles and she said the Zenimal, a screen free meditation device, had been a game changer for her daughter with ADHD and anxiety. I immediately purchased the Zenimal and can confidently say it was the best tool to help my daughter get better sleep. She was able to fall asleep an hour earlier using it.

Katie: Yes, it's actually really helped my kids to be able to calm their busy bodies at night.

Mallory: What we love about the Zenimal is that it combines two of our favorite bedtime recommendations, using a relaxation strategy and removing screens from the bedroom.

Katie: The Zenimal is an adorable screen free turtle with nine guided meditations your kids can choose from. And our absolute favorite part of the Zenimal is that every meditation ends with the most important message, 'you're a good kid.'

Lori: To grab your own Zenimal and get your child and yourself some better sleep, head to Zenimals.com and use our code: TCC for a discount. You can also find the link in the show notes.

Katie: What do I do after my child runs out of passes?

Lori: Yeah, so this is, again, it's really important to talk about this with your child ahead of time. So when you're talking to them about you get the three passes, you have only three opportunities to get out of bed. Once that happens, I'm going to walk you back to your room if you get out of bed, and I'm not going to talk to you and we're not going to say anything, I'm just walking you back to bed. So again, we kind of say, like try not to make a lot of eye contact, try not to speak, which is really hard when your child is trying to engage you. That part is going to be really hard and I want people to understand how essential it is to hold that boundary. So if this is to work, you have to stay calm, you have to stay consistent. And I want people to understand when your child has been used to getting out of bed a million times and you give them that attention, they're not just going to not do it right. So many kids are going to up the ante, so they might get louder, they might start crying, they might start, getting really upset and physical. And again, we just expect that. I always tell parents, expect that their behavior is going to get worse before it gets better. So, a lot of times those behaviors will escalate. So really just be consistent about not giving much attention and just taking your child back to their room. Understand that when you're first doing the system and when your child is used to getting out of bed 100 times, they're going to continue to do that. And you might be doing that and taking them back to their room with no words and no communication and no engagement. Many times, those first few nights, you have to expect that otherwise you're going to feel like you're doing something wrong. It's not you doing something wrong, it's just a part of the process.

Katie: Yes. And I think the prepping is really the key there so that your child understands what's going to happen and that it doesn't feel like all of a sudden you're breaking your connection with your child and you're putting this harsh consequence on them. You're letting them know, okay, you have these three passes, and after you use them, then we're not going to be talking anymore. And I think that is very foreign and that can feel really hard. So I just think that's really good to acknowledge. Like, you will have already prepped your child, you will have already talked through it, and as you do it a few times, they can start to learn.

Lori: Yeah. And even on that last pass that they give you, you can say, remember, this is your last pass. You don't get any more passes. No getting out of bed. If you do get out of bed, I'm not talking to you, I'm not looking at you. We're just walking straight back to your room. So it's really important, again, for your child to understand what's going on so they're not overwhelmed, but they're going to test the limits of that. I guarantee you.

Mallory: As is common with so many parts of parenting, when we change the way we're doing something, things might become more challenging before they get better. And it's just important to remind yourself, in parenting, you're making this change because it aligns with something that's important to you, or it aligns with a value and that you know, the end goal here, the reason you're doing this is in your child's best interests, and that can be really hard sometimes. And it can make you want to give up if things get more challenging before they get easier. But with consistency and sticking to it, things can get better. And in the process, you're teaching your child a skill that you have deemed is very important, in this example, falling asleep in their room independently.

Lori: Yeah. And I think it can be really hard too, as someone who has an anxious child, when your child's saying, I'm scared, and you can feel like, oh my gosh, I'm being a bad parent because they're scared and I'm not helping them through that. But ultimately, for them to overcome that fear, they have to face it and they have to learn, I can cope with this. I can sleep in my room alone and no one's, again, I have so many kids that have fears of, like somebody's going to break into the house and my parent has to sleep next to me. No one's going to break into the house even when my mom's not there. But the only way for me to learn that is to fall asleep when mom's not there.

Mallory: And that's the trickiest thing about anxiety. Anxiety is just so hard for young kids because you have to expose them to the one thing that is the most scary to them, staying in their room alone. But that's the only way that you can break that anxiety cycle.

Katie: And I would say that if that's something that's going on and it's every single night, the anxiety is like taking hours and really, this bedtime pass is not really designed for a kid who's experiencing extreme anxiety, right? At that point, you're working with a professional to try to figure out some tools and coping strategies.

Lori: Absolutely. But I think a lot of kids, it's very normal to have some fears at nighttime, and that is something that you can usually address through a system like this. But yes, if your child is having really excessive fears, we absolutely would encourage you to work with a professional to help them address some of those things because the anxiety might be too high for them to cope with that. But I always tell parents whenever we start an intervention or doing something new, the process isn't a linear process, meaning a lot of times parents go into that thinking, okay, once we have a really great night or two really great nights where they didn't get out of bed and they slept well and oh my gosh, yay, yay, yay. And then night three, all of a sudden they're getting out of bed 100 times and you're like, oh my gosh, I'm doing something wrong. This is so frustrating! That again, prepare yourself because that's really normal. Whenever we start doing interventions with kids, it's never going to be like all of a sudden there's this improvement and it's a straight shot from here on out, right. You're going to have nights where it'll come back or that anxiety will be higher for your child. And again, your job is to one understand that there are going to be harder nights even after they've been better and to continue to just be consistent with the system.

Mallory: absolutely.

Lori: And really plan on when you're implementing something like this, give it a good two solid weeks of consistency for you to feel like things are getting better.

Mallory: And kind of going along those lines, thinking specifically about the bedtime pass. Once you have had those two pretty consistent weeks of your child either not using all of their passes or just sticking with the number of passes they're allotted, then you can start to cut back on the number of passes that they're given to, two passes to one pass, so that you're kind of fading that support over time until, like I said earlier, you're two weeks in and you realize that your child hasn't even used a single pass. You do want to have an eye for, how do you fade this system over time? But it's not like every night you're going to be reducing their allotted passes by one. It's probably at least two weeks of things being steady before you're ready to pull back.

Katie: That actually is a good point because I was curious, what do you do if you have your two or three bedtime passes and you wake up in the morning and you didn't use them? What do you recommend?

Lori: Yeah, and I think a lot of times we encourage parents to do something really positive or have some fun incentives in the morning for when they are successful in staying in the bed or they don't use all their passes. So you can do any type of thing that your child finds exciting. And whenever we talk about using an incentive or a reward for things, the best thing you can do is talk to your child and get a list of ideas from them because you want something that's motivating to them. But just a few examples might be getting out of having to do a morning chore. My kids hate having to play with their dog, which is so irritating because we bought the dog for you to play with, but they never want to have to play with the dog in the morning. So if I were to take over that chore, they would love it. Picking the music that they get to listen to in the car, they're always fighting about that, so they love that. Or even getting like a token. And if they earn four or five tokens during the week, then over the weekend we get to go see the new Trolls movie as a family, can be something really exciting. So those are just some examples, but again, really trying to focus on incentives to get our kids excited about because that makes them a little bit more excited about using the bedtime pass where it's like, ooh, I get to earn some fun things, right. And also it can be just kind of be a powerful teaching tool to have those immediate consequences for our kids when they're successful. And pairing that again with really positive feedback on how proud you are of them, for doing something that's hard and it's hard to do those hard things. But we love that you are really trying with this.

Katie: That is so helpful. Thank you, ladies. I know for myself when I've been in the trenches of bedtime, I'm just so irritated and exhausted after a full day of parenting. And I think it's so important to me to end each day on a positive note with my kids. And so when bedtime doesn't go well, I almost can tell myself, like, oh, the whole day is ruined. All the fun that we had or all the good things I did, now I'm just like a terrible parent. So I think this is a great strategy for helping families. It's practical and it's evidence based and it's worth a shot. So our key takeaway for today is that if your child is getting out of bed multiple times at night, first and foremost, you are not alone. We've all been there. And the bedtime pass can be a safe and effective way to help them to stay in their bed and fall asleep on their own. Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!