

The “Bedtime Pass” – New Help for Children Resisting Bedtime

It’s been a long day for Lola Franco and her husband, Kevin Seaman. They have barely begun to unwind from a hectic workday in New York City when they both begin to nervously eye the clock on the wall. Bedtime is fast approaching, and so is the battle to get their only child, two-year-old Patrick, to sleep.

“It’s just a pain,” Franco says. “We have to read him three or four stories and then stay with him until he falls asleep. It can take an hour,” she explains. Once asleep, Patrick wakes up three or four times during the night crying out for his parents or getting up to get one of them to come put him back to sleep. “He doesn’t sleep well and neither do we,” Franco says.

Patrick’s struggle – and his parent’s resulting exhaustion – is outlined in a recent report appearing on DrKoop.com. It is well known that everything from separation anxiety to getting used to a new babysitter can disturb a child’s sleep. But parents like Franco can now try a new approach that promises to reduce bedtime battles to minor skirmishes.

The deceptively simple method involves giving children a “pass” good for one trip out of the bedroom after bedtime. The study, which was published in the October 1999 issue of the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, suggests that this pass could eventually eliminate problems like Patrick’s entirely. “It’s so novel and so easy,” states the journal’s editor, Catherine DeAngelis.

During the study, two brothers, ages three and ten, were each given an index card, the “bedtime pass,” just before bed every night. Each could turn in his pass for one post-bedtime trip out of their room. The trip had to be a quick one with a specific purpose, such as a hug from mommy, a drink of water, or a visit to the bathroom. By the end of the three-week experiment, neither child was crying or coming out of their bedroom at all.

“You might wonder why we’d publish a study involving two patients,” DeAngelis says. The hope, she explains, is that pediatricians will explain the technique to parents and report back on its success among patients.

The reason the pass works is unclear, admits Patrick Friman, one of the study’s authors. He speculates, however, that there are three possible explanations. “A child saving the valuable pass may simply fall asleep waiting to use it,” he says. Or the mere presence of the pass may offer a child a sense of security. It may also be that a child with a pass now has access to something he wants – a trip out of bed – so it loses its appeal.

Resistance to bedtime is normal in toddlerhood and early childhood. All children go through a phase in which their favorite word is “no.” During this phase, the desire to disobey parents often allies with lingering separation anxiety clustered around going to bed, resulting in the nighttime behavior problems. The bedtime pass can provide some sense of control for the child who otherwise experiences an anxiety spike around his or her bedtime ritual. Without some form of perceived control, the child can be compelled to exhibit a full-frontal challenge to the parental authority.

While clearly the bedtime pass may not work for every situation, I believe it has a reasonable chance of success, even with the strong-willed child. In my practice here in Lawrenceville, I have already had several parents report success with the bedtime pass. I welcome any feedback regarding your experiences with this tool, if you decide to implement it.