

# Caring for you...



## Helping Kids Feel Safe at Night

For many children who have experienced trauma, loss, or sudden change, bedtime can feel especially difficult.

At night the house becomes quiet, the lights go out, and a child is asked to separate from the adults who help them feel safe. For children with trauma, this can feel **petrifying...unbearable...debilitating** and this leads to triggering the brain's alarm system.

The amygdala is part of the brain that watches for danger. When a child has experienced frightening or unpredictable events, the amygdala can stay on high alert. This can activate the fight, flight, or freeze response, even when the child is now safe.

During times of stress or change, the thinking part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) is often offline. This means children are not choosing their behaviour – their body and emotions are responding to stress.

*Because of this, the first nights in a new place can feel very different from later in the week.*

### Why Nighttime Can Be Difficult

A child will most likely:

- Feel scared when the lights go out
- Questions who you are and why you do this?
- Worry that you will do something bad?
- Have racing thoughts or big feelings
- Wake during the night and need reassurance
- Struggle to settle their body and mind

These responses are often the brain trying to protect the child, even when they are now safe.

### They will need Co-Regulation

It would be unrealistic to expect that any child in the first week of removal from their home or family, won't require co-regulation. Children borrow calm from trusted adults. Before bed, spend a few minutes helping their body slow down:

- Sit as close as they allow and read together
- Rock the bed gently **instead of** touching the child
- Slow breathing together
- Repeat a calming song or children's story

Your calm presence helps their nervous system settle.

## How to give kids their power back!

Choice....!

When we have a choice, we have a sense of power. For children who have just been removed from their home, their family and their life.

***Choice is gone. Their power is gone.***

Helping them get some back will have a massive impact from the first night to the first week.

So how do we do this....It's actually easy!

Take every demand that you are going to ask of a child and offer two options. Bingo...we now have choice. Child has power!

**\*\*Only offer choices that YOU can follow through on. No promises or exceptions. Or this will lead to immediate distrust = Unsafe.**

Example:

- Where do you feel safest to sleep? On this bed or this one. A bed or the lounge?
- Would you like to take yourself to bed or with help?
- What would you like for dinner? A sandwich or chicken. Would you like to eat at the table or the lounge?
- Would you like bath or would you like some wipes/face washer to clean yourself?

**Remember!!!**

To a child, there is nothing normal about this situation. So expecting normal responses will not work. Keep it simple, very limited instructions and don't forget their prefrontal cortex is offline.

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## Helping Kids Feel Safe at Night...cont

### **The First Night - Focus: Safety and Connection**

*The first night is often the hardest. A child's brain may feel like it needs to stay alert to survive. They may be overwhelmed, scared, or unable to settle. At this stage, reasoning or explanations will not help. The goal is to help the child's body feel safe.*

#### **The DO's**

- Stay physically and emotionally present
- Sit nearby while the child falls asleep if needed
- Use a soft night light or leave the door slightly open
- Offer a transitional object such as a soft toy or blanket
- Speak in a calm and predictable voice

*Simple reassurance can help:*

*"I'm right here."*

*"You are safe tonight."*

*"You don't have to be alone."*

Even if the child wakes during the night, calm reassurance and presence can help their nervous system settle.

#### **The Don'ts**

- Stress about bathing, they have often come from worse. If it's stressful leave it to tomorrow.
- Children...often don't eat when stressed. Offer water or snack but don't stress if they don't eat.
- Don't assume what they need. It will be most likely be something you can't offer e.g old home item
- Don't try to analyse just let them be, they are in survival mode and will struggle to take in anything you say.

### **The First 3 Days - Focus: Regulation and Predictability**

In the first few days, the child's brain is still scanning the environment to see if it is safe. Sleep may still be disrupted. This is normal. The most helpful thing you can do is create predictable patterns.

Try to keep the same bedtime routine each night:

- Bath or shower
- Pyjamas
- Story time
- Goodnight message with or without cuddle- child's choice
- Lights out
- If they wake, its simple rinse and repeat!

Routine helps the brain start to learn:

*"This is what happens here. I know what comes next."*

Co-regulation is also very important. This means helping a child regulate their body through your calm presence.

You might:

- Sit beside them while reading
- Offer a gentle back rub
- Breathe slowly together
- Speak softly and calmly

Your calm nervous system helps their nervous system settle.

### **The First Week - Focus: Building Safety**

After several days, some children begin to relax slightly, but bedtime may still bring worries or big feelings. Consistency is what helps safety grow.

Continue:

- The same choices
- The same bedtime routine
- The same reassuring words
- The same comfort objects
- The same calm approach when they wake

Avoid introducing too many changes during this time. Stability helps the brain reduce its sense of threat.

Some children may still need extra reassurance or support at bedtime. This does not mean things are going wrong – it means their brain is still learning that this place is safe.

#### **A note on Transitional Objects**

A transitional object is something that helps a child feel connected to safety when they are alone.

This might be:

- A favourite soft toy
- A special blanket
- A small object that reminds them of someone who cares about them

These items can provide comfort and reassurance during the night.

**Remember:** Once a transitional object has been given or chosen by a child, it can't be taken away; especially not due to behaviours. This will break the power of the transitional object. Creating more grief and loss and feeling unsafe.

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## Helping Kids Feel Safe at Night...cont:

### **Pressure to talk, behave and respond.**

For children new to a placement, they feel an immense pressure to please and or fall into line with the home they have been placed.

**This can be exhausting for children** and lead to more behaviours. So the easiest thing to do is to follow a play therapy based approach that sees a carer provide **ALOT** of reflection and clear boundaries (especially non-negotiables) in your home. This will provide the child with a roadmap that they can use to feel safe.

### **Reflecting :**

- What the child chooses or voices
- Actions or behaviours the child makes
- Non-verbal signals they may make
- Stating out loud what the child might be thinking

By doing this it helps the child:

- Know if you understood them and visa versa
- Heard or accepted what they said
- Know what your next step will be
- Feel heard and seen

Here are some simple scripts to help?

- "You have chosen to keep the light on tonight"
- "You would like to walk to your bed by yourself"
- "It looks like you want a drink, is that right?"
- "I'm wondering if your feeling cold?"
- "I'm going to put this sandwich here if you feel like it"
- "In our house we ask before we hug"
- "I'm wondering if this tv is too loud for you?"
- "Being in a new house can feel scary. I'm wondering if you are feeling that way?"

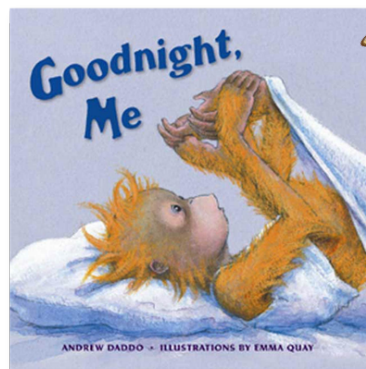
Giving **pre-emptive verbal reassurance** means gently telling a child what is about to happen before it happens. This helps reduce surprise and allows the child's nervous system to stay calmer.

- "In a few minutes we're going to brush teeth."
- "After this story, it will be time to turn the lights off."
- "I'm going to step out of the room for a moment, but I'll be right back."
- "When the light goes off, your night light will stay on."
- "In case your wondering, we all have our own beds in our house. No one will share your bed. Your bed is just for you".

## **Top 10 Calming activities**

1. Choose a gentle calming lullaby or poem to recite
2. Guided meditations
3. Audio story
4. Relaxation music
5. Deep pressure massage
6. Sensory brushing this could be hair or body
7. Using different coloured lights or dimmed
8. Safe Place Visualisation:
9. Calming scents

## **Life Tales: #1 Best Tip**



A sleepy, affectionate baby orangutan says "Good night, me" from head to toe, acknowledging his feet, legs, and body for the day's adventures.

This book has been used for 6 years in our house and the great thing is that the concept grows with the child.

**0-3yrs:** A super easy and quick little bedtime story that helps them know learn about their body and relaxation

**4-6yrs:** A really easy way to get kids to focus on their body and learn to regulate as they say goodnight to their body

**7-10yrs:** By now they'll know the story and can use it more directly to help them regulate and find calm when going to bed

**12+yrs:** Continue to use this on a more in-depth level to support body consciousness and emotional regulation. Great for grounding when stressed.

# Life Tales

Find more resources at  
[www.ourlifetales.com.au](http://www.ourlifetales.com.au)

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