

When Worry Shows Up at Bedtime

Three Therapeutic Strategies Parents Can Use with Children of All Ages

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Bedtime is one of the most common times anxiety shows up for children. When the day slows down and external distractions fade, their nervous systems finally have space to surface unresolved worries. Parents are often surprised by the sudden fears, big questions, or racing thoughts that appear just as lights go out.

This pattern is developmentally normal. Worry at bedtime doesn't mean a child is "overthinking" or being difficult, it means their brain is seeking safety and regulation. How adults respond in these moments plays a key role in shaping a child's long-term ability to manage anxiety.

Below are three strategies parents can use with children of any age, from early childhood through adolescence.

Validate First: Name the Experience

When a child shares worries at bedtime, adults often move quickly into reassurance or logic. Don't say, "Oh there is nothing to worry about, there is absolutely not a monster under your bed." While well-intended, this can unintentionally signal that the feeling itself is a problem.

Instead, reflect to your child to name and validate what they are feeling.

- "It sounds like your worries are really loud tonight."
- "Your brain is still trying to sort things out."

Validation helps calm the nervous system by communicating safety and connection. It reduces emotional intensity and opens the door for regulation. Importantly, validation does not mean agreeing with the worry, it means acknowledging the internal experience. Sometimes that is all they need to hear.

Contain Worry With Predictable Boundaries

Worry tends to grow when it feels endless. Children benefit from learning that worries are allowed, but they don't get to take over bedtime.

Parents can create a worry container, such as:

- A brief daily "worry time" earlier in the evening when you and your child spend 2-3 minutes discussing worries.

- Writing worries down and placing them in a notebook, a box or even an imagined visual container. “If you wanted to put your worries into an imaginary container, what would it look like?” Once they have described the container to you, have them imagine putting the worries into that container.
- A consistent phrase like, “We can come back to this tomorrow”

This approach teaches children an essential skill: emotions can be acknowledged without being indulged indefinitely. Predictable boundaries support both emotional expression and sleep hygiene.

Regulate the Body Before the Mind

An anxious brain cannot settle until the body feels safe. At bedtime, problem-solving is far less effective than calming the body.

Helpful strategies include:

- Slow, paced breathing together.
- Gentle pressure (hug, hand on back, weighted blanket or stuffed animal).
- A consistent bedtime routine that signals predictability and safety.

When the body shifts out of a stress response, worry often decreases naturally.

Supporting Long-Term Resilience

The goal is not to eliminate bedtime worry entirely. Rather, it is to help children learn that worry can be managed within the context of connection, structure, and regulation. Over time, these repeated experiences strengthen a child’s capacity for self-soothing and emotional resilience.

Parents don’t need perfect responses—a calm, attuned presence is the most powerful intervention.