



Toddler 4 R system for big  
bed success



**TODDLER 4 R  
SYSTEM FOR BIG  
BED SUCCESS**

## *Moving to a big bed*

Moving from a cot to a big bed is an exciting transition! Sometimes it goes well, other times we end up with toddlers who won't stay in bed, or who come out in the middle of the night.

They want us to lie with them, or we've started habits we don't want to carry on with.



All these challenges can be overcome with the Baby Sleep Consultant trade mark 4 R's! You can also use these 4 R's during the transition to the big bed.

Set yourself up for success with rules, role play and rewards whether you are moving to the big bed this week, or overcoming a recent challenge. Use the 4th R - silent returns for any getting out of bed troubles.

## *Role Play*

Great for lack of impulse control, changing a sleep association like feeding or bed sharing, or coming out of their room at night.

Carrying out any role play is super effective for showing toddlers exactly how it is that you expect them to behave around a certain aspect of life. Children effectively learn most things through role play.

### **Role play the bed time routine**



Our children watch how we eat, drink, talk and behave. We often only think about the bad habits our children pick up from us, such as swearing. But our children learn so much about life from us. Children often need to observe a parent on the toilet as good role modelling for toilet training, we sit down and eat family dinners to role play how to eat with cutlery and sit nicely.

Yet we don't think about consciously role-playing bedtime, or good sleep routines.

When does your toddler observe you falling asleep? Or a sibling falling asleep? Yet we expect them to know what it is we expect and we get frustrated when they don't!

To successfully role play you would use a doll, or teddy or toy to role play a new bed time routine and involve your toddler as much as you can.

If your toddler can talk, they can tell the toy the bed time rules and what will happen if they get up etc. If they can't talk, they can watch as you do it. Then you can both stand outside the door and play make believe that they are crying or getting out of bed.

You can read to the toy, set them up a little bed on the floor with a pillow, try to make the routine as similar to yours as possible, but nice and quick to hold your toddlers' attention.

Then together you can hold the door shut, or do "silent returns", or 3 strikes. Get creative, remain calm, involve your toddler and clearly role play exactly how bedtime will be carried out.



If you are going to use praise or rewards or positive consequences in the morning, do the same for the toy or toddler.

Give the toy its own sticker chart, or sticker, or high five, or m&ms. You **don't** need to tell your toddler they aren't getting their own reward but their toy is.

Just praise the toy and give it the reward and explain why he is getting the reward, such as “well done teddy you stayed in bed all night, here is your sticker, I am so proud of you”. If your toddler hasn't qualified for their reward carry on with your morning, don't rub it in. The jealousy factor here is powerful, you don't need to do anymore!

If your toddler has qualified for the reward then praise them both, reward them both and carry on with the morning routine.

I have observed a toddler get so jealous of his mickey mouse getting rewarded, that he threw mickey out of bed in the night so that when mum returned in the morning, he said “Look mum Mickey didn't stay in bed all night”. At this point holding back her laugh, mum said “Yes Mickey did get out of bed, he will not be getting a sticker. But you will!”.

This demonstrates a very clear understanding of what is happening, and how powerful positive role play is. If your bedtime has been a drama for quite some time now, your child probably has no idea what it is you expect of them, this is due to inconsistent reinforcement completely confusing children.

This needs repair, and apart from very clear consistent routines, role play is the most powerful way to quickly rectify this.



# *Rules*

Great for impulse control, any change in how your child is going to sleep, removal of any sleep association, changing a rule around where you expect your child to sleep, or an early wake.

Creating a bedtime rules poster is a very important part of establishing new clear positive boundaries for children. Children need these clear boundaries as they will exert their will against so much in life, it's actually exhausting for them, and many will find it a relief for you to give them clear expectations around their bedtime routine and night sleep.

Bedtime rules should be phrased in the positive, not the negative.

Bedtime rules should be simple and clear.

Stick to 3-5 rules maximum.

Allow your toddler to choose 1-2 rules within this 3-5 rules.

If your toddler is at the extreme end of difficult behaviour and you think they will struggle to follow the 3 golden rules, give them one you know they will follow to give you the opportunity to praise immediately.





## *3 golden rules*

1

Stay in bed.

2

Be quiet as a mouse.

3

Close your eyes.

4

Optional rule: Stay in bed until the clock is “awake” for solving early wakes.

I use the positive term, ‘stay in bed’ as opposed to ‘do not get out of bed’ because children tend to hear the ‘get out of bed’ not the ‘do not’.

I ask them to be as quiet as a mouse, as they like making a mouse face with their fingers as whiskers by their nose and saying “eek eek” when we talk about this rule. Just another opportunity to be positive with children who are being asked to comply!



I say 'close your eyes' as opposed to 'go to sleep', as no one really knows how they go to sleep, and some children can develop anxiety around this as they feel they don't know how to do what you are asking them. But closing your eyes and staying in bed usually results in sleep!

These rules are also helpful for early risers who maybe aren't tired enough to return to sleep at 6.30am, but it is not unrealistic to ask them to stay in bed until 7am, be quiet, and close their eyes. Obviously, we don't police 'close your eyes', but it's a good rule.



Examples of rules your toddler can choose for themselves to give them the feeling of ownership over their rules, as the feeling of some control over a very strict situation.

- ★ I get 3 bedtime stories.
- ★ I get bubbles in my bath.
- ★ I get 2 kisses each night from mum and dad.
- ★ I get to choose 2 toys to have in bed with me.
- ★ I get my drink bottle filled up.
- ★ I choose my pyjamas.
- ★ I get a cup of milk after my bath.

Examples of rules you could incorporate that your child could easily achieve in order to get immediate praise within the bedtime rules.

- ★ Have a bath.
- ★ Put pyjamas on nicely.
- ★ Brush your teeth nicely.
- ★ Put teddy to bed.
- ★ Eat some dinner.
- ★ Shut your curtain.
- ★ Pull the bath plug out.

# *Rewards*

As parents, motivating our children to do things we want them to do can be a challenge. It may be tempting to resort to bribes and rewards, but it's important to understand the key difference between the two.

Bribes are often given in the heat of the moment, during negative behaviour. For instance, if our child is throwing a tantrum, we may offer them a treat to calm them down. However, this reinforces negative behaviour and can create a cycle of misbehaviour.

On the other hand, rewards are predetermined and agreed upon beforehand. They are given only after positive behavior is displayed, reinforcing the connection between good behavior and rewards. For example, we can tell our child that they will receive an ice cream cone once they clean their room or after they behave well during a doctor's appointment.

While it may be tempting to resort to bribes, focusing on rewards can lead to better long-term outcomes. By communicating expectations and reinforcing positive behavior, we can encourage our children to develop good habits and behaviors.

## *Why Children Need Rewards*

Rewarding your child for every little thing they do is not ideal. But it can be beneficial to offer incentives when they accomplish tasks that are challenging or less enjoyable, such as staying in bed when they don't feel like it.

Just like children, adults also need motivation and rewards to accomplish tasks. As humans, we respond to incentives, and we are more likely to engage in certain behaviors if we know there's a reward waiting for us. For instance, many of us wouldn't be willing to work overtime without being compensated.

Applying the same principle to children, rewarding them can have a positive impact on their behavior. However, it's important to find the right reward that's appropriate for the task at hand. Let's explore some strategies for selecting suitable rewards for your child.

Rewards are a clear positive consequence for following a pre-arranged set of rules or expectations, and these rewards are not mentioned when the undesirable behaviour is occurring.



Some people feel rewards are an undesirable way to parent, and that you are teaching your child to only behave in a certain way for a reward. But expecting a 1-4 year old to have an intrinsic motivation to stay in bed is not only unrealistic, it's not age appropriate.

Humans as a species behave and respond to rewards. You watch too much Tik Tok because your brain is rewarded with dopamine, you go to work because you are rewarded with a paycheck. You don't break laws because you fear the consequence, and you carry out acts of kindness because you are flooded with feel good hormones as a reward.

Rewards activate a special pathway in the brain, this leads to your child feeling good, and wanting to seek out this stimuli again tomorrow!



Humans respond to rewards like food, music (toddler dance party before breakfast!), social contacts (high five, praise,) and affirmations, self or external.

Looking at this list you can see the expensive toys aren't listed, even if your toddler needs to get 10 stickers before the "big prize" the daily reward of a high five and affirmations are actually more powerful than the price of the toy or activity at the end.



How often we reward and when we reward is called by psychologists schedules of reinforcement, and these influence how likely your child is to engage in the behaviour again. (Like staying in bed all night!)

If we are looking to teach a new behaviour like staying in bed, or sleeping without a bottle, or sleeping with you, the best kind of reinforcement is continuous reinforcement.

This means reinforcement every time the behaviour occurs.

Once this new behaviour is more of a habit, changing to intermittent reinforcement is the strongest way to maintain this behaviour.

After you see the new sleep behaviour is more settled, switch to a variable interval. Sometimes you reward once a week, sometimes twice and sometimes 3 times! You can extend this out as your child gets better and better until the high fives are once a fortnight and the dance party is once a month.

Essentially your toddler doesn't know when the reward is coming, so they stick with the rules. The behaviour also becomes a fixed habit which doesn't require reward after a couple of months. Psychologists describe this as resistance to extinction.

Let's look at the argument against rewards...

Some parents argue that rewards kill a child's inner drive and makes it hard for parents to keep up.

But thinking about the simply change of staying in their bed all night, what is your toddlers motivation to change? It only bothers you that they come into your room and wake you up....

Parents worry that their child will grow up relying on external sources for joy, I would argue that this is about balance.

External rewards are powerful, use them wisely!

Teach your child to comply to simple requests day to day. Teach them to take pride in themselves which teaches intrinsic motivation. Affirmations from you can teach self-affirmations, which can encourage pride and joy in the art of doing the hard thing, or the right thing without an external reward.



Some parents will tell you they had to continue to raise the stakes when it came to rewards to get any response from their child.

This is likely due to 2 reasons.

The rewards were purely physical and didn't have any affirmations with them. Or they didn't switch to a variable interval once the behaviour changed.

The final reason why rewards may seem to not “work” or need to be raised, is that the child has no consistency day to day with having to comply to reasonable expectations. A child who is never told no, or who is always allowed to control the day, or the parent won't respond to a simple reward chart.





There are no consequences in their life, so rewards have to be big to have any impact.

Where as the child who knows that no means no, and that a request to tidy up the toys is followed through on by the parent, also responds to rewards.

We never say “remember your sticker chart? You won’t get a sticker if you get out of bed one more time” - that’s a threat.



We never remove a reward or tell a child during undesirable behaviour that they no longer qualify for their reward. - That's negativity and doesn't usually do anything except frustrate and upset your child more.

We never remind a child during undesirable behaviour "Come on darling stay in bed, mummy will give you the sticker in the morning" - that's a bribe.

Rewards can be your child's currency if you know their currency..... Do they thrive on positive praise and high fives? Do they love Paw Patrol? Stickers from their favourite TV character can be a great incentive and are often as cheap as \$2.

Do they want your time? Create a sticker chart, where 3 stickers gets them a one on one outing to the park, or pool with you and only you! Print a visual picture of what they will get, or draw a picture together, so everyone is clear on the reward and the process to get there.

## *Popular rewards with my clients:*

- Stickers or stamp charts as explained above (never ever remove a sticker for poor behaviour).
- Immediate morning rewards for younger toddlers such as sticker or stamp on the hand.
- 1 m&m in the morning.
- Star shaped toast for breakfast.
- Pancakes or a special breakfast in the morning.
- Wish stones (magical wish stones).
- A piece of Lego needed to complete a Lego set.
- Tokens to redeem for new bed time stories.
- Coins for a small container to spend in the weekend at the \$2 shop.



Children under 3 usually do better with immediate rewards as they struggle with the concept of time, so explaining that “this weekend” we’ll go to the pool is often not effective, but a sticker of Dora is.

Rewards should carry on for around 3 weeks, at which point you can either start working on a new behaviour or just phase out the rewards as the behaviour has cemented a the new “normal”. Don’t get more and more elaborate in that time, keep it simple and consistent.

If it takes a week for your toddler to start to consistently get the reward give them 3 weeks of consistent rewards before removing.

When you phase out the rewards, don’t phase out the positive language and behaviour, this is always effective!



Any reward needs to be accompanied by positive language such as “hey buddy you are awesome, look at you! Staying in bed all night. Wow you did so great! Look at you, you little super star, staying in bed all night! I am so proud of you! You are so clever, I knew you could do it! High five, come and have breakfast!”

Without the praise and over the top acknowledgement even the biggest present and reward can fall flat. Your strong-willed toddler is used to being told ‘no’ and is used to you being frustrated at them. They want to please, and they love hearing they have done something right!

Build them up as much as you can, as life tends to try to push children down!

Do a dance, celebrate their success, this IS a big deal for them!



## *Silent Returns*

I can't tell you how many phone calls I receive from parents saying they have tried silent returns and they don't work.

Silent returns are not magic, they are not a way to force your child to sleep, or a way to assist your child to sleep like patting and rocking.

They are a consequence for getting out of bed. They do not work in 2 situations predominantly.



# 1

The child has not yet developed impulse control, which usually occurs close to 3 years old. They view silent returns as a fun game to play with mum and dad late into the night until they get so upset and over tired they can't sleep. If your toddler laughs at you during silent returns, they think this is a game, and you possibly need to hold the door shut for 10 minutes to show them this is not a game or try a different approach from the list below.

# 2

If the parents are not doing silent returns silently. Now I know this sounds logical right? Silent returns mean silently. But this takes a LOT of resolve from us parents in an especially stressful time when we just want to yell or scream or beg, just a little....imagine your toddler just got out of bed for the 54th time. You are likely to speak right? But don't. Toddlers thrive on attention. It is like oxygen to their fire. We need to starve that we fire at this time, not feed it. So do not speak one word.

Not one....the entire time! Your toddler will probably ask you questions, beg you to talk, say “Why you not talk mum?”, this is them trying to engage with you, and your job is to hold that poker face, bite your tongue and put them back to bed with no sound.

How exactly do you do a silent return?

Carry out your positive bed time routine as you have planned from this guide. Work out if you are a door open or door closed family. Explain in your rules or bed time routine, that if your toddler gets out of bed you will put them straight back, and there will be no talking until morning.

Leave the room, but if you are fairly certain they will get up, don't go too far. Wait outside their room out of sight. We don't want them to make it all the way to the lounge or kitchen looking for you. As soon as they appear at the door, pick them up and pop them back to bed.

If they are too big to be carried, you can frog march them, just turn them around and gently guide them to their bed. Don't say anything!

If they get back out and start to run towards the door as you leave, you repeat the above and take them back to bed as many times as you need.

If they are running you will need to catch them before the door.

If they start to kick you or hurt you in anyway, this is not acceptable behaviour in any circumstance, you do not have to stay and expose yourself to this. You have done all the positive steps leading up to bed time, at this point I suggest you confidently remove yourself from the room, knowing you prepared the room and it is safe. Shut the door and keep it shut for 10 minutes.

If they calm down in this 10 minutes but they are not back in bed (likely at the door begging you to open it or crying for you to return.) You would open the door, and pop them back to bed. If they are emotional, you can give them a cuddle as you do the silent return. But stay silent, trust me on this. We are meeting their emotional needs, but not engaging as it is sleep time.

If you don't deal with kicking or racing you to the door, but your toddler just keeps appearing at the door, don't panic you are on track. You simply carry out these silent returns as many times as needed for your toddler to stay in bed.

We have had several clients get up close to 100 silent returns on night one. But carried out successfully night two is usually an 80% reduction in silent returns. Knowing this, and knowing you have a toddler, have a discussion in your house if dad is better suited to this, as it can be quite physically demanding.

Just between you and me, if you carry out 100 silent returns, go and pour yourself a well-deserved drink, or crack open the good chocolate, you deserve it!





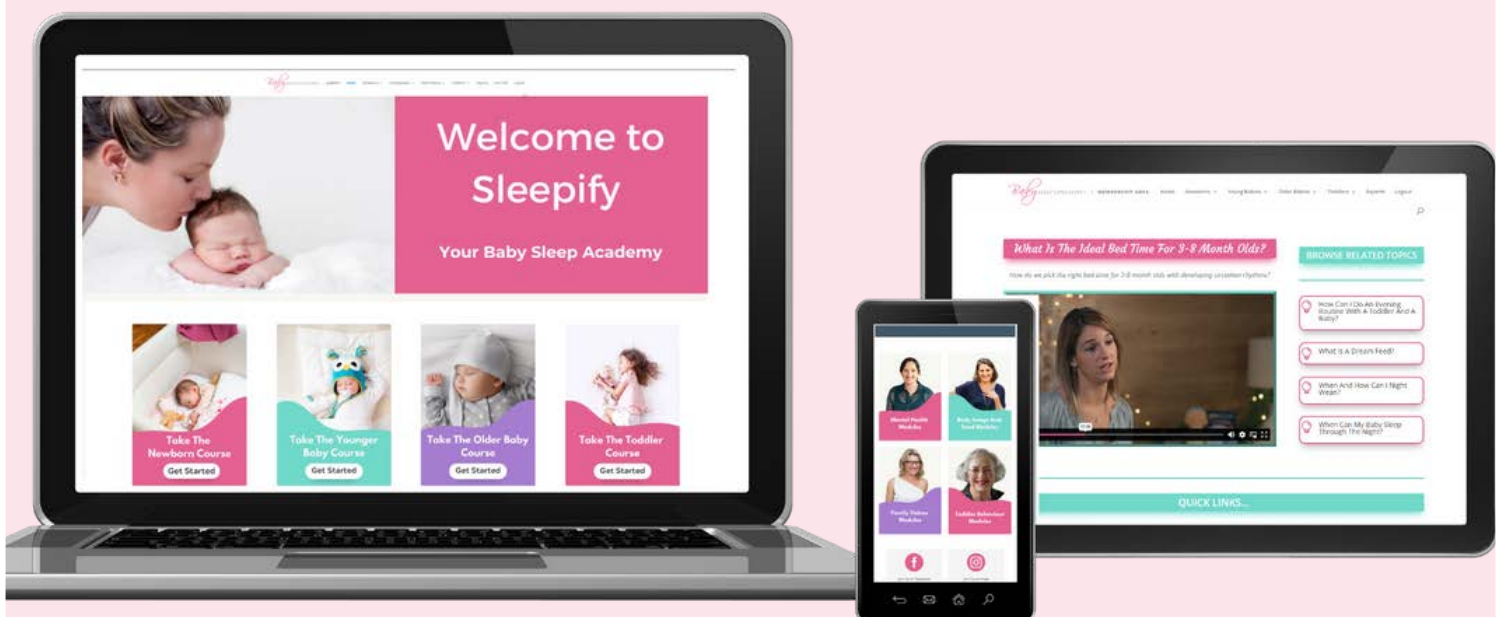
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# Author

**Emma Purdue** is the owner and founder of Baby Sleep Consultant NZ and Australia, Happiest Baby on the Block educator, and Mother of 3. She has a Bachelor of Science and a Diploma in Education from the University of Auckland.

Her approaches in child sleep have led to developing an international training company, certifying and training sleep consultants worldwide. [www.babysleepconsultanttraining.com](http://www.babysleepconsultanttraining.com)

Emma's team of consultants has helped over 50,000 tired parents around the world; they understand sleep in all areas, as well as parental stress and the emotional challenge we face as parents when trying to improve our children's sleep.

It's not easy and you only want what's best for your child. The Baby Sleep Consultant Team have many free resources on our website in addition to this sleep guide [www.babysleepconsultant.co](http://www.babysleepconsultant.co)

We have live sleep Q&A on our Instagram every Sunday <https://www.instagram.com/babysleepconsultant/> join us for one soon!

If you need some one on one assistance we offer phone, email and home consults, please get in touch  
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## *Emma Purdue*

Emma is the owner and founder of Baby Sleep Consultant, she is a Certified Infant and Child Sleep Consultant, Lead Educator for Baby Sleep Consultant Training, Happiest Baby on the Block Educator, has a Bachelor of Science and Diploma in Education, she is a Gentle Sleep Expert and Mother of 3.