can’t make ’em do it: sleeping, eating, toileting

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

Sleeping
It is naptime and Marcel’s teacher, Svetlana, strokes Marcel’s eyelids in hopes of soothing him to sleep, but every time she stops — Marcel’s eyes pop open.

Eating
Evangeline has spent the past half hour coaxing Magdella to ‘just taste’ her salad. Finally, Magdella gives in, accepts a miniscule bit of lettuce, gags, and then spits it out.

Toileting
Harold’s son, Matthew, is the only child in his toddler class still in diapers. Tonight, Matthew sat on his potty through three readings of Curious George, without results. As soon as the Pull-Ups® were back on, an all too-familiar odor became evident. Harold got out a new diaper.

– Solution –

Sleeping, eating, and toileting battles frustrate most adults. Why? It’s simple — we can’t make ‘em do it. Falling asleep (or not) is within a child’s control. The same is true for chewing and swallowing, or withholding and releasing urine and feces. Sleeping, Eating, and Toileting (S.E.T.) create lots of UPSET!

An exhausted adult wants her child to SLEEP! An anxious parent expects her child to EAT! And most adults are prepared to ELIMINATE diapers, long before children are.

What can be done? Lots, actually. First, we need cooperation — but that may take an attitude shift.

Control: Adults first

In our original examples, the phrase ‘gives in’ provides a clue that a power struggle is involved. A power struggle results whenever one person tries to get another to act (or not to act) in a certain way.

The truth is: the only person whose behavior we can truly control is — our own. Everything else requires cooperation — and cooperation is an elusive critter. This does not mean that we ‘give up’ (another power struggle term) but decide what we ‘Can Do’ — then ‘Do It.’

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word “snapshot” of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.
Routines: The power of predictability

Bedtime is one thing — sleep another. A predictable routine — playing chase first; then bath, story, or lullaby (not the other way round), constitutes a restful bedtime routine. Routines help children make sense of their world and its predictability reduces resistance, while enhancing cooperation. The key is that once the routine is completed, it becomes the child’s job to fall asleep, even if it takes a while.

An adult can control his part of the evening routine by doing what he says he will do. This means staying calm in the face of resistance (don’t argue — just do); and being kind but firm about expectations (walking a child back to bed as often as it takes). Remember, nature (in the form of fatigue) is on the side of sleep.

Control we can provide

What Evangeline, from our earlier example, has control over is the food she provides. Children cannot procure candy, fake fruit drinks, or chips on their own. If everything (or most everything) we provide is nutritious, whatever is eaten will be worthwhile, but . . . what gets eaten remains up to the child.

Harold may not be able to control Matthew’s output, but he can control his own. He might read only one story while Matthew sits on the potty. When (or if) Matthew succeeds at producing something on the potty, Harold might offer another story to celebrate Matthew’s success. By focusing on controlling what he provides (stories or attention) Harold lets go of his part of the power struggle, thus freeing Matthew to do his own letting go — or not.

Routines: Ready – or not?

S.E.T. activities also involve readiness. Readiness can be physical and developmental (including the physical environment as well as a child’s biology), or emotional, which involves a child’s temperament*.

Physical and developmental readiness

Children need to run, jump, and move — then be given time to calm and recharge. Hours spent in front of a television or computer screen don’t do this. If we provide active movement opportunities, children will be tired enough to sleep. Soothing music or white noise (an air purifier, the rumble of the clothes dryer, or an aquarium’s bubbling), and the offer of a gentle back rub will foster the relaxation needed for sleep.

It may come as a surprise, but for some, crying provides stress relief. That youngster screaming, “I’m not sleepy,” may be paving the way for sleep to come. When we negotiate, argue, or supply endless cups of water we may be delaying sleep, as well as adding our exhaustion to theirs.

Hunger is another form of readiness. When was snack time? Nutritious snacks offered every few hours can replace a formal meal, while stopping snacks an hour or more before meals can prepare a child to feel hungry.

Physical readiness also affects toileting. There are issues of bladder size: can it expand to hold urine? Are sphincter muscles developed enough to get to a toilet in time? Can this child get his pants or Pull-Ups® off by himself?

Can she wake from a deep sleep if she needs to pee?

Small steps will help:

First, familiarize a child with the bathroom by allowing her to sit on the toilet or potty (with clothes on and no pressure to produce).

Next, allow her to sit and pretend ‘to go’ or maybe watch you (if this is comfortable for you).

Finally, have her sit on the potty with pants down or diaper off.

By focusing on readiness skills, instead of pressuring her for results — her confidence will grow and so will her cooperation, and success!

Fine tuning: Emotions and temperament

A child’s emotional readiness may be tied to family dynamics or can be a reflection of temperament. If a child feels overpowered, embarrassed, or scared she will often express those feelings (which she probably cannot even name) through her behavior.

Parental fighting, divorce, or changing environments (a new apartment, different child care, or a teacher leaving) affects a child’s feelings. Not sleeping through the night, turning down a favorite pasta salad, or an increase in toileting accidents may reflect unsettled emotions. Think through what is going on and look for ways to discuss, reassure, or be available with extra hugs. It is also important to keep caregivers informed of difficult or changing family situations.

Temperaments: Our expectations/timing

Temperament affects behavior from day one. One child may have always had erratic sleep habits, another will be especially cautious with new foods, and a third will have a built-in hesitancy
about anything new, including that potty chair. Such responses may reflect a child’s natural temperament, indicating that we may need to modify our expectations and behavior.

The child with less regular sleep patterns will still need to rest at naptime, though he may be allowed to page through a book instead of being expected to sleep. This will meet the child’s needs and the needs of the situation.

The picky eater (or any child) will feel more comfortable with new foods if we involve him in food preparation. One preschool teacher made ‘kale and pineapple smoothies.’ At first the children said, “Yuck” to this strange green stuff. By helping prepare the drink, however, they were all willing to sample it — and some even requested refills. Contrast that to the children who didn’t help: none of whom would even try it.

Involvement is a powerful motivator for cooperation.

Though the steps described earlier for introducing a child to the potty may sound time consuming, for a slow-to-warm-up temperament child, they are vital. Research has shown that waiting for a child’s readiness will, in fact, speed things up.

Success and cooperation

If we control our behavior — instead of trying to force theirs, children learn to cooperate. Providing consistent routines, taking time for training, modifying our expectations, and involving children in ways that encourage are all within adult control. When children sleep, eat, or use the toilet is within theirs. Once we accept this, it is more likely that ALL will be SET for better rest, less indigestion, and fewer diapers.

*For a more thorough look at temperament refer to either Positive Discipline: The First Three Years or Positive Discipline for Preschoolers, both by Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, Roslyn Duffy (Three Rivers Press, 2007).