



## **The Emotional Impact of Bedwetting**

**Bedwetting is a problem beyond the child’s physical control,  
and it can take a huge emotional toll.**

Imagine how you would feel if you had a problem you couldn’t control that caused you to do something embarrassing on a regular basis. Over time, this problem would likely make you feel ashamed and out of control – much the way a child who wets would feel.

Whether or not the child understands why they wet the bed, it's a problem that they are likely ashamed of. After all, to hear their peers talk, wetting the bed is something babies do. And that is not a positive message for the child's self-confidence.

**Over time, the feelings of shame and embarrassment from bedwetting can result in a number of problems that affect how the child feels about themselves, how they interact with their peers, even how they perform in school.**

- For example, psychologists who have examined children with chronic bedwetting problems have found that these children rate themselves as being less competent in school and sports, less physically attractive, and less accepted socially. These effects may get worse with children who are older.
- Children who wet the bed have also been shown to be more likely to have behavior problems, such as aggressive behavior and attention problems.
- Having to deal with the constant fear of being discovered as a “bedwetter” is an awful burden for any child. They feel they are different from their friends, since they believe they are the only one who wets the bed. The wish of many children is just to wake up with a dry bed in the morning.
- And then there's the toll from lost sleep. Children need sleep for their bodies to develop properly, to learn effectively, and to stay healthy.
  - In studies where elementary school-aged children had the number of hours they slept reduced, their teachers reported more learning problems, including difficulties remembering older material, learning new lessons, and completing their work.

- When you consider the amount of time it takes to clean up from bedwetting - from changing the sheets and putting on new pajamas to calming an upset child - it's more than likely bedwetting is keeping the child from getting the sleep they need.

**In order to deal with all the pressures that come with bedwetting, many children try to cope with the problem in their own way. One way is to pretend that bedwetting does not bother them.**

**It is not until the child feels comfortable with the question and can trust that no harm will come to them will they start to discuss their bedwetting problems and fears.**

**This is where the parent can have an impact; helping the child feel safe enough to talk about the effect bedwetting is having on them emotionally.**

### **So if a child wets the bed, how do you minimize the impact?**

- The first step is helping them understand that it's not their fault - and making them aware that you know it's not their fault. You can do this by explaining what causes bedwetting.
- They need your support and positive reinforcement. Let them know that lots of kids have the same problem.
- Give the child hope. Tell them that it will not last forever – they will outgrow it.

Punishing or reprimanding a child for wetting the bed can only make the child's feelings of shame worse. Because the child probably only gets punished in other situations when they intentionally break the rules, this can reinforce the message that the child is doing something wrong.

Studies have shown that just the act of treating bedwetting - regardless of the outcome - can improve your child's feelings about themselves as well as their behavior. Addressing and treating bedwetting can also prevent the physical problem of bedwetting from becoming an emotional one.

## **Bedwetting isn't just stressful on a child who wets the bed – it can be stressful for everyone in the home.**

As a parent, your routine is probably exhausting enough without having to get up during the night to change the child's sheets, get them into clean pajamas, and calm them down after an accident. Not to mention all the extra laundry from having to wash the wet sheets.

Having a child who wets the bed can cut down on your own sleep, making everything more frustrating - from dealing with the bedwetting problem, to getting the other kids ready for school, to handling your own responsibilities.

Though bedwetting may be a frustrating problem for you, it's important not to let the child know how frustrated you are. If the child wets the bed, they are likely stressed out enough about the problem, without the added pressure of feeling like they are disappointing you or making you angry. Punishing them for wetting the bed doesn't help anyone, especially given the fact that bedwetting is something your child can't control.

## **How to Support the Child**

- Reduce the emotional toll by explaining to the other children why bedwetting happens.
- Set the tone by making sure never to blame the child for something that they can't help doing. Make sure they know bedwetting isn't their fault.
- Make it clear to others that teasing or taunting will not be tolerated – especially in front of other children.
- Reward the child not for dry nights, but for following their bedwetting treatment plan.
- When bedwetting accidents occur, praise the child for trying to stay dry, and for helping to clean up.

## **Key Points about Bedwetting**

- In a child with normal bladder control, nerves in the bladder wall send a message to the brain when the bladder is full; the brain then sends a message back to the bladder to keep it from automatically emptying until the child is ready to go to the bathroom. But children with bedwetting issues have a problem that causes them to urinate involuntarily at night.
- Doctors don't know for sure what causes bedwetting or why it stops. It is likely due to a combination of factors such as:
  - The child cannot hold urine for the entire night. Their bladders may be too small to hold a large volume of urine.

- The child does not awaken when his or her bladder is full. Some children sleep so soundly that they do not wake up to urinate.
  - The child produces a large amount of urine during the evening and night hours, or they have muscle spasms to prevent the bladder from holding the urine.
  - The child doesn't produce enough antidiuretic hormone (ADH), the hormone which causes the body to produce less urine at night.
  - The child is dealing with emotional issues including significant life changes, trauma and stress.
  - The child may have had developmental delays that interfered with toilet training.
  - The child often has a parent who had the same problem at the same age so there seems to be some hereditary connection.
- There are two types of bedwetting:
    - Primary bedwetting in which the behavior has been going on since early childhood without a break.
    - Secondary bedwetting in which the behavior starts up after the child has been dry at night for a significant period of time, at least 6 months.
      - In most cases, secondary bedwetting is caused by underlying medical issues or emotional issues.
      - Family history of bedwetting is common in this type.

## Strategies to Address Bedwetting

There is not one strategy that works with all children. Addressing bedwetting issues often requires trying a number of different approaches to find one that may work with a particular child.

For example, calming techniques at bedtime may help the child who wets due to stress, but for the child with bladder capacity issues, calming may not have an impact.

Unfortunately, it is rare that we know the exact cause of bedwetting, so it is difficult to pinpoint what technique will be successful. Trial and error, along with a lot of encouragement, is the key.

Be sure to look for any "hidden causes" of bedwetting: what is the child experiencing emotionally that might be contributing to the issue? Give the child the opportunity to talk about their stressors.

### Supporting the Child:

- Teach the child to imagine themselves waking up dry before they go to sleep. Practice this positive imagery with them during the day so they are prepared for the evening.

- Help the child build his/her self-esteem by focusing on their strengths and positive traits.
- Work with the child to plan for how they can respond effectively to teasing, if needed.
- Create a quiet time at bedtime to ease any feelings of anxiety or stress. Read a book together, massage the child, go through a visualization, etc.
- Invite the child to draw or write about how they feel about their bedwetting issues. (See activity at end of this lesson)

#### Behavior Modification:

- Train the bladder during the day – have the child hold urine for increasing longer times throughout the day, and get rewarded to do so
- Introduce a reward system not necessarily for dry nights, but just for following the bedwetting treatment plan.
- Guide the child to drink less before bed
- Eliminate bladder irritants at night, start by eliminating caffeine (such as chocolate milk, etc.) and cutting citrus juices at night.
- Set an alarm for around 1-2am to get child to awaken and use the toilet.
- Give the child a flashlight – sometimes children are afraid to get up at night to use the toilet when it is dark.

**A child doesn't just stop bedwetting one day. Usually the journey to dry is a progression. A child may wet the bed every night, then maybe five nights a week, then maybe only three or four....it's a transition.**

### **Bedtime Book Activity**

Children experiencing nighttime wetness often dread going to sleep, knowing that they will likely wake up wet. Making this book is a good way to educate the child on bedwetting and help the child express their emotions.

Materials needed:

- Paper, markers, crayons, bits of fabric, ribbons, etc.

Help the child draw a bed on the first page of the book, and then work with them to draw and decorate the rest of the story. Ask questions such as:

- What do you like about your bed? What positive feelings does it give you?
- What don't you like about your bed? What negative feelings does it give you?
- Draw your fantasy bed. What would it look like? How would it be different from yours?

While the child is drawing, use this opportunity to discuss the information in this lesson. Allow the child to end the book the way he/she likes, and bind the pages together.