

Toddler bedtime resistance flowchart.

The 6 most common stalls — what's driving each, what to do first, what to escalate to, what to avoid. Print and pin inside the bedroom door for the witching hour.

"I need water" (after bedtime)

Connection-seeking + delay tactic. Real thirst is rare if a cup was offered during routine.

DO FIRST → Offer one small cup BEFORE lights out as part of routine. Then: brief, neutral 'Water was at bedtime, see you in the morning.' Walk out.

IF PERSISTS → Water bottle (sippy) on the bedside. They learn to self-serve.

AVOID → Negotiating each request. Each negotiation trains the next request.

"There's a monster"

Real developmental fear from age 2.5+. Brain is now capable of imagining things that aren't there.

DO FIRST → Acknowledge: 'Your brain made up something scary. Brains do that. You are safe.' Hand them a 'monster spray' (water bottle with sticker) — agency is the fix.

IF PERSISTS → Nightlight in the corner (not over the bed). Stuffed 'guard' animal. Door open 6 inches.

AVOID → Saying 'monsters aren't real.' Their brain knows; the feeling is still real. Validation works better.

"One more story"

Routine extension request. Often signals connection deficit during the day.

DO FIRST → Set the count BEFORE starting: 'Two books tonight.' Show the books. Read both. 'Books are done. Snuggle, then sleep.'

IF PERSISTS → Add 5 min of 1-on-1 connection earlier in the day. Often dissolves the bedtime stall.

AVOID → Starting with 'You can pick the books.' Define count first, choice within it.

Climbing out of crib / bed

Crib: developmental ability + curiosity, usually 18mo-3y. Bed: lack of clear rule.

DO FIRST → Crib: lower the mattress to its lowest setting; sleep sack with no foothold. Bed: walk them back, neutral, no eye contact, repeat as needed.

IF PERSISTS → Crib: convert to toddler bed when they're climbing reliably (safer). Bed: 'silent return' protocol — back to bed, no words, every time.

AVOID → Sleep training book techniques mid-toddlerhood. Different developmental stage.

Refusing PJs / teeth / bath

Autonomy assertion. 2-4y is peak "I do it myself."

DO FIRST → Offer choice within the rule: 'Blue PJs or green PJs?' 'Toothbrush in your hand or mine?' The rule (PJs / teeth / bath) is non-negotiable; the how is theirs.

IF PERSISTS → Make it part of a song or game. Routine playfulness > confrontation.

AVOID → Open-ended 'do you want to brush teeth?' That's not a real question.

Calling out repeatedly after lights-out

Pattern not yet broken. Each response = reinforcement.

DO FIRST → Pre-bedtime: 'I won't be coming back unless you're hurt or sick.' First call: brief check, neutral, 'It's still nighttime.' Subsequent calls: silent, longer wait each time.

IF PERSISTS → Sleep training method appropriate to age (Ferber-style, chair method). Pick one and stick to it for 2 weeks.

AVOID → Inconsistency. Going in sometimes and not others teaches the slot machine — keep trying, eventually it pays off.

The pattern across all 6: name the underlying need (connection, autonomy, fear), give it within a non-negotiable boundary, stay consistent. Bedtime resistance is rarely about sleep — it's about the developmental task that's active right now.