

BABY ADVOCATE

At 36 months

Health

My child has been toilet trained for a while now, but he still wets the bed at night. What can I do?

- Toilet training during the night is a more difficult process than during the day. He will need to reach a point where he will get a signal in his sleep that allows him to wake up and go to the bathroom. You can make sure that he knows what to do when he gets that signal, but make sure not to pressure him. To approach it slowly, you might want to put a child size potty right next to his bed—even if it is just a few steps closer than the bathroom. Your goal is to be patient until he can get to a point where he can rouse himself to get up and use the bathroom. If you feel comfortable, it is best to leave your child in diapers until he is able to stay dry. Many nights of wetting the bed might make him feel unsuccessful and cause him to lose interest.

When our family sits together for meals, my child always says she's not hungry and wants to play instead. Should I make her eat something?

- It is wonderful that you are having family meals, and the fun of conversation and being with each other should be the central focus, not the food. If feeding has not become a battleground, most children will model themselves after others. Three-year-olds are able to eat only at mealtimes and regularly scheduled snacks, so first make sure that she really is hungry at meals by keeping to that schedule. If she says she is not hungry (even if she is), it is advisable not to force her to eat food. In order to be comfortable not making her eat, you might have to think about your own childhood and the eating patterns and struggles that were established. She should know that once she gets down from the table, she cannot come back. Many children think that playing is more fun than eating, but will soon understand that their hunger will make them want to participate in mealtimes. The key is to make your family meal as much fun as playing.

My relatives always give my child candy and junk food. I don't want him to have it, but they argue with me saying, "He's just a kid—it won't hurt him." What should I do?

- You can have a heart to heart with your relatives and explain that you are trying to have your child develop good eating habits that are predictable and healthy. Recognize the reason why they want to give your child candy and suggest another way to love your child (such as reading a book to him). You won't be able to convince every one of your desires, but it is important that you make it clear to your child why you don't give him candy and how important it is that he eats well.

Development

My child is still sucking her thumb and I want her to stop. What can I put on her thumb to stop her?

- Your child is learning about our stressful big world, and thumb sucking is her way of self-soothing. Most experts see thumb sucking as a sign of competence, not as a bad habit. It is important to evaluate why you desire your child to stop sucking her thumb, and understand why she has the desire to do so. Because she seems to need her thumb to self-soothe, you trying to make her stop might lead to a power struggle.

My child is refusing to sleep in his bed, saying there are monsters in his room. I've never let him watch a scary movie, so I don't know how he even knows about monsters. What should I do?

- A three-year-old is beginning to realize his space in the world and how small he is in comparison to it. This developmental phase of learning how to stand up for himself and when to be aggressive brings new fears and phobias. At this age, your child will start picking up on ideas from other people and places, and it is important to communicate with your child about his ideas of monsters. Many children at this age have frightening dreams of monsters that lead to a fear of bedtime, of being alone, or of the dark. You can provide a safe place where your child can talk about his fears and where you teach him that you also have fears and aggressions. Help him see that fear is a natural feeling and that he will not feel so afraid as he grows. You can look under his bed and in the closet for monsters, but calmly reassure him that you both know they are not there, even though he worries about them. He might need some extra support such as a blanket or cuddling during this time.

When I say "no" to my child, my partner sometimes says "yes." I'm afraid my child will think I'm the mean parent.

- Everyone enters a partnership with their own value system and it is important to recognize your different points of view as strength. This enables you to have a broader vision in raising children. It is important to talk about your different values, your own upbringings, and to communicate about what you want for your family. Remember, you don't need to convince your partner that your values are valid, but you both need to recognize the importance of developing shared outcomes and compromising on how to get there. It is most important that you present yourselves to your child as a united front that cannot be divided. Reaching a decision together about what you will both say "yes" to and what you will say "no" to is extremely important.

My toddler has an "invisible" friend, whom she talks to all the time. I'm getting worried that this isn't normal. Is she okay?

- Having an imaginary friend is typical of children at this age. Children have them because they are learning about the world and need a way to imagine how what they are learning would be acted out. An imaginary friend can experience all the bad and good that your child thinks about. During this stage in your child's development, make sure to respect the privacy of her imaginary friend. In asking questions about this "invisible" friend, you might ruin her fantasy with reality. Allow her to work out her learning about the world in this very normal and precious way.

Prevention

How old should a baby-sitter be? We have an eager 14-year-old neighbor who seems very mature.

- Your baby-sitter needs to be old enough to make your child her biggest priority and to handle an emergency. You should check her references and monitor her performance on a trial basis. It is a good idea to allow her to first take care of your child while you are home. If you decide to leave her alone with your child, start with short amounts of time and progress from there.

My child is so friendly to everyone. Should I tell him not to be so friendly to strangers?

- It is wonderful that your child is friendly, even to strangers while in your presence. Talking to others allows your child to continue to formulate his ideas about the world and demonstrates that he is feeling secure. You should talk to him about not ever going with strangers and not approaching them unless he is with you. A child this age is not yet mature enough to determine who is safe and should always be under adult supervision.