

# yes, you can

Even if your toddler is a certified member of

# if

YOU HAVE A TODDLER IN THE FAMILY, LIKE I do, chances are you're woken up way too early every morning, roused by the voice of a tiny child who's burning with energy and hungry to boot. And you probably already know that sound machines, room-darkening shades, and bedtime adjustments won't necessarily solve the problem. Young kids are wired to wake up with the sun.

But here's what you may not know: Just because your kid's awake doesn't mean you have to be. Experts say that, depending on their temperament and maturity level, many kids are able to fend for themselves in the morning, at least for a short time, by age 3. In fact, even some 2-year-olds can play quietly in their rooms. You've simply got to train them.

My sister-in-law, who has four children, has done just that. Her littlest ones, ages 4 and 2, know they can't leave their rooms until there's a 7 on the clock. Then they find bowls of dry cereal waiting on the kitchen table. Tiny stickers show them which buttons to press on the remote control to fire up

their favorite movie. And Mom, blissfully, sleeps until 8 A.M.

To get to that point, you'll have to do a bit of work, and take some precautions (see "Keeping It Safe," page 84). Most important, says Ari Brown, M.D., author of *Toddler 411*, before you start, ask yourself: Do I trust my child when my back is turned? Think about whether she always follows instructions—and so might be ready for a little more independence—or tends to get into mischief, in which case it might be best to wait. Make sure you child-proof the area where your early bird will be, and that she understands it's okay to wake you in an emergency. Then let the training begin.

By **Michelle Crouch**

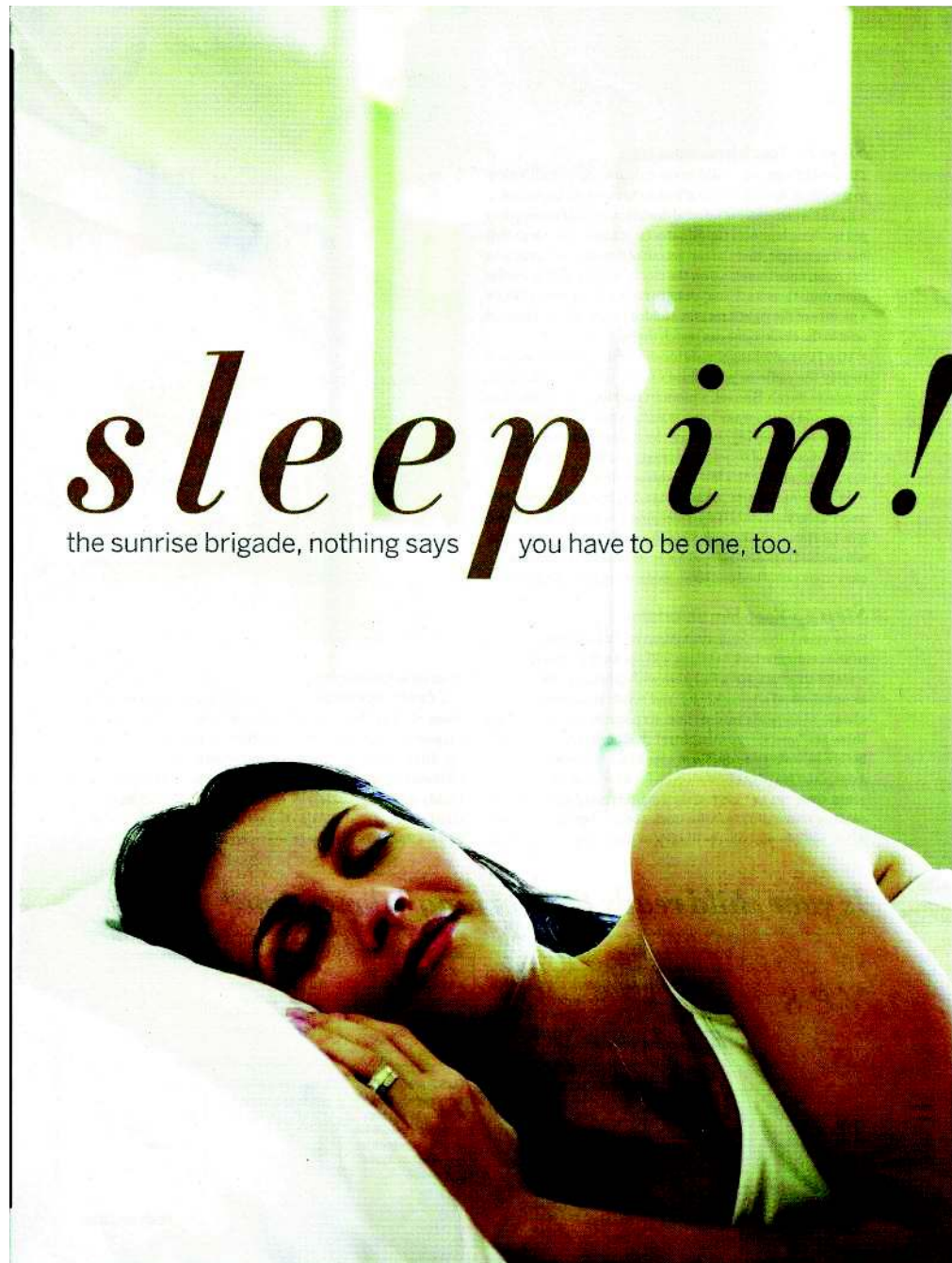
"Consistency is the main thing," advises Lawrence Shapiro, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Norwalk, CT, and author of *A Parent's Guide to Getting Kids Out of the Family Bed*. "Try it three or four times, and most kids will learn to love it."

The benefits, he adds, won't only be yours. "This is not just about Mom and Dad sleeping for another hour," Shapiro says. "It's about giving your child a chance to learn how to entertain himself, how to make breakfast. That's good for him."

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# sleep in!

the sunrise brigade, nothing says you have to be one, too.



### Step 1 > Teach her about time

The first things your child needs to learn are when it's okay to get out of bed and when it's okay to come wake you up.

> **BY THE NUMBERS** Put a digital clock in your child's room, then put masking tape over the minutes (so it's less confusing). Tell her, for example, that she can get out of bed and play quietly in her room once there's a 6 on the clock, but she can't leave the room until there's a 7. Too young to recognize numbers? Draw a picture of the right times on a folded index card and place it next to the clock so she can match them.

> **TO A TUNE** If telling time is too difficult, set an alarm clock to play the radio or your child's favorite CD at, say, 7 A.M., suggests Sarah Hansel, a mom in Eldridge, IA. When her 3-year-old twins wake her too early, she brings them back to their room, saying she'll see them when the music starts. "The first couple of times, they cried," she says, "but we stuck to it, and it only took a few days before they got it."

> **BY THE HALF-LIGHT** Try putting a dim lamp on a timer, so it won't wake your child if she's sleeping. Or check out the Good Nite Lite ([goodnitemite.com](http://goodnitemite.com); \$34.99), a product designed by a dad whose child kept getting up at 5 A.M. It glows like a sun when it's okay to get out of bed and like a moon when it's still nighttime.

### Step 2 > Keep him entertained

Some especially self-reliant children might be able to find ways to amuse themselves, but most will need a little inspiration.

> **WAKE-UP-TIME TOYS** Fill a bin with quiet playthings, such as puzzles and sticker books, and rotate them so there's always something interesting. Explain to your child that these are "special morning toys" that he can play with only before he wakes you up. Then sneak into his room after he's asleep and leave the box waiting for him on the floor.

> **HIS OWN "PLAY" LIST** Make a digital recording of yourself reading your child's favorite stories or singing songs he loves, get an audiobook from the library, or pick up a podcast online.



Then show him how to turn on the player himself.

> **A CRAFT SURPRISE** On the weekends, Ridgewood, NJ, mom of four Nicki Bosch puts out the supplies for an easy-to-do craft project. "I tell them that when they wake up, there's going to be a super-secret project in the kitchen for them, and that they can surprise Mommy and Daddy with it once they're done," she says. "They're so excited about it that they go to bed happily the night before, and it affords us at least an extra hour of sleep."

## Is your child ready for morning "alone" time?

yes

During the day, he can play quietly by himself for 20 to 40 minutes if you're on the computer, making dinner, or taking a shower.

She understands it's okay to wake you if she gets hurt or something spills, but it's not okay to surprise you by cooking breakfast.

He's able to wait for things, such as when you tell him he can have dessert in five minutes.

She can follow multistep directions, and her preschool teacher or other caretaker describes her as a rule follower.

He wants to do "big kid" things.

no

He thinks it's funny to turn on the appliances or leave the house when you're not looking.

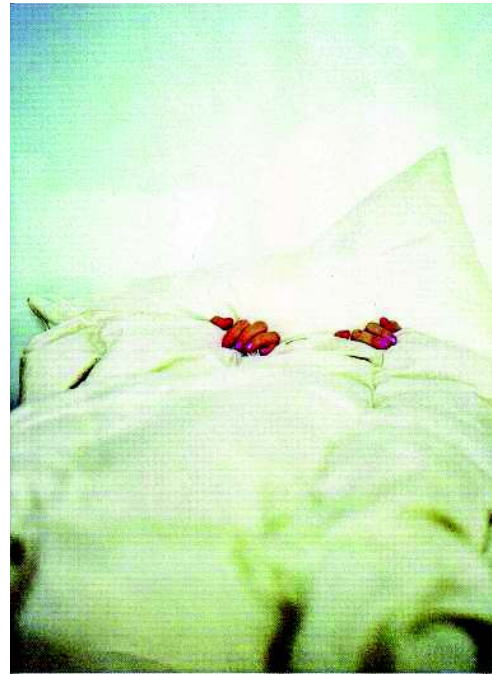
She has separation issues and cries or gets anxious when you leave the room.

He has trouble with self-control. If you tell him to eat his sandwich before his cookie, what will he do when you leave the room?

She has trouble playing by herself.

His preschool teacher or caretaker describes him as "demanding" or "mischievous."

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### Step 3 > Start the day (without you)

Since mornings are often hectic anyway, motivate your kid to tackle some getting-ready tasks on her own.

> **DRESSING UP** Pick out a few outfits that your child can put on herself, and set them out the night before. Tell her she can choose any outfit she wants, but she can't wake you until she's dressed (this will also save you getting-out-the-door time).

> **CHOWING DOWN** If your child is usually ravenous when she rises, leave a "wake-up tray" in her room with a bowl of dry cereal and a juice box, as well as an activity to keep her busy.

> **INVITE HER IN** If you try all these strategies and she's still waking up too early, she just may not be ready. Instead, let your child come into your room and play quietly while you doze. Elizabeth Pantley, author of the *No-Cry Solution* book series, suggests creating a fort in your room by placing a blanket over some furniture, putting a few toys or books inside, and calling it her "morning nest." Got a TV in your room?

### Keeping It Safe

**DO A TRIAL RUN** See if your kid can do 20 to 40 minutes of quiet time in his room during the day, while you're awake. If so, try it in the morning, but stay awake to listen.

**CHECK FOR HAZARDS** Make sure outlets are covered, medicine is locked away, and there are no other reachable temptations. Use a safety gate to block stairs.

**GO SLOW** Start with a short 10- or 15-minute interval, then work your way up to 30 or 40 minutes. (For kids under 5, any longer is unreasonable, experts say.)

**ROOM IN** The safest strategy? Keep kids in their rooms. If you're worried she won't stay, mount a safety gate in the doorway and keep your door open so you hear her.

**DON'T PUNISH** It's okay, though, to repeatedly return a child to her room until a reasonable time. And when she does it right, make sure to reward the behavior.

### Tips for the Under-2 Crowd

If your baby is still in a crib, you obviously aren't going to be setting up morning craft projects. But there are a few things parents of tiny ones can do to get a little more shut-eye.

**DON'T RUSH TO GET HER** If your baby wakes up early and she's not crying, leave her in the crib, says Atlanta pediatrician Jennifer Shu, M.D. "She may drift back to sleep or at least entertain herself until it's a more reasonable hour."

**FIND AN EARLY-MORNING SITTER** When you really need to catch up on your zzz's, ask Mom or another relative to spend the night and wake up with the kids. Or hire a sitter to arrive at 6 or 7 A.M., then go back to sleep for an hour or two.

**TURN OFF THE MONITOR** Or at least turn it down. If he wakes and starts playing, you don't need to hear every coo and squeal. Unless your room is very far from your baby's, you're going to hear him when he really needs you.

**USE CLIP-ON CRIB TOYS...** From simple plastic mirrors to elaborate activity centers, there are dozens of toys that attach securely to crib rails. "A musical toy with a button a baby can push over and over is great entertainment," says Dr. Shu. (Be sure to take down hanging mobiles, which can be dangerous once your child can sit up.)

**TRADE OFF WITH DAD** Why are you both losing sleep? Even if you can take turns only on weekends, that one morning of extra sleep can make a difference.

**AND INSIDE-THE-CRIB TOYS** Once your child is 1, you can sneak in and leave a few age-appropriate toys inside the crib, Dr. Brown says, as long as they have no small pieces and your child can't stack them and climb out. Try soft blocks, a baby doll, or board books (great for reading and huring over the rail). Rotate the toys so your baby will always have something new.



**PUT A PLAYPEN IN YOUR ROOM**

If your baby isn't happy unless you're nearby, set up a play yard in your room and fill it with a few favorite toys. Practice during the day first, then once he's comfortable, try it in the morning—while you snooze a little longer.

Turn a fave show on low and let her cuddle up next to you.

And remember, on those days when you're desperate, you can always resort to pure, unadulterated bribery. Once when we knew we were going to have a particularly late night, we told our early-rising 2-year-old we'd give her ice cream for breakfast if she stayed in her room until 7 A.M. It worked! ■

**Michelle Crouch** is a freelance journalist in Charlotte, NC, whose three young children wake up with the sun.