

Remedies for the Witching Hour

Surefire strategies for preventing evening meltdowns

By Beth Howard

Parents

An hour ago, you were confidently giving a budget report or happily chasing your toddler at the park. Now you're consoling a crying child and stirring a pot on the stove, close to tears yourself. Welcome to the witching hour, when the day's stresses catch up with the whole family, turning well-mannered children into kidzillas.

The witching hour is not just the province of colicky babies. It actually can affect every member of the household: "None of us is at our best in the hour before dinner," explains Carol Baicker-McKee, Ph.D., a child psychologist and author of *The Preschooler Problem Solver*. "Blood sugar is at its lowest, and fatigue is high. Families are in transition, and kids are often at their neediest. It's no small wonder that this time of day can feel like a lethal experience for parents."

No mom gets a free pass from the pre-dinner doldrums. "Employed moms desperately want some time to decompress, and stay-at-home moms may yearn for quiet time alone," says Kathleen A. Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., a health psychologist and author of *The Hidden Feelings of Motherhood*. How do you switch gears while keeping the peace, without resorting to pinot grigio and earplugs? Start with a few of these ideas.

Dress the part of parent.

Changing after work helps you make the mental shift you need to quell sour moods, yours included. "The minute you put on your comfy clothes, you begin to relax," says Laura Markham, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City and founder of AhaParenting.com. Your child gets equal benefits. "When I taught day care, I'd see parents in expensive clothes literally pushing their grubby kids away to avoid dry-cleaning bills," says Dr. Baicker-McKee. At least keep an old coat or a smock in the car to put over your nice dress — so you can avoid getting finger-paint all over it when you give your child a big hug.

Get a dose of nature.

Kids and parents may be cranky and tired, but chances are they're also overstimulated. So give everyone the opportunity to get away from it all, even briefly. Before beginning your evening routine, take a walk around the block or just head out to the yard, says Janet Allison, a family coach in Portland, Oregon. "Focus on the smallest plant, discover a bug or a worm, or just watch the sunset — it will help you let go of the day's leftover stress," she says.

Give kids what they want — you.

"The mistake that many moms make is to come home and immediately feel they have to jump into household chores," says Dr. Kendall-Tackett. Experts advise working parents to give their children (especially babies and toddlers) the undivided attention they crave after a day of separation, before seeing to dinner. "Prior to doing anything, even taking my shoes off, I give my kids my total attention so they don't spend the next two hours fighting for it," says Shannon Eis, a New York City mom of two. "They just need ten minutes with me, and then they move on to more entertaining things."

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Evening Routine

Host a kiddie cocktail hour

Offer children some water or milk while they munch on carrot sticks or broccoli florets and hummus, chunks of cheese, apple or cucumber slices, or cherry-tomato halves before dinner. As long as they're snacking on something healthy, it doesn't matter if they aren't able to clean their plate come mealtime. Plus, "it's amazing how many more veggies kids consume when they're served as a snack rather than competing with carbs on the dinner plate," says Dr. Markham.

Set the stage for calm.

Dim the lights, arrange comfy cushions, and put on relaxing music. Preselect a "library" of dinnertime CDs that kids can pick from. That gives you some control, Dr. Baicker-McKee says, while letting them play a role in the evening routine. Allow kids to get their favorite blanket or **stuffed animal** and encourage them to sing along to their favorite songs.



Put on your own oxygen mask first.

To grab a little downtime before meal prep, try a tag-team approach, giving each parent a moment to gather themselves, suggests Mark E. Sharp, Ph.D., a psychologist in Oak Brook, Illinois, who specializes in working with families. Once your partner has had a few minutes to relax after walking in, let him take over for a few minutes while you shower or change. Single parents may need to be more creative. Reading restored one of Dr. Sharp's solo-mom patients, so she started taking a novel with her to work. On the way to pick up her son from day care, she would stop and read for 15 minutes. "When she arrived, she was in a much better place to deal with him, and nights went more smoothly after that," says Dr. Sharp.

Go "bowling."

Occasionally, on one of those crazy-busy nights, dinner is simple: cereal and fruit, admits Jennifer Soos, a marriage and family therapist in San Antonio, Texas. Sometimes she throws in some toast with peanut butter and jelly. And why not? There's no prep, virtually no cleanup -- and no complaints from the kids. "I try to have some of the healthier cereals on hand so it's not just sugar bowls for dinner, but it's a nice break from cooking," she adds.

Create a comforting tradition.

Family rituals can help mark the transition into evening time, says Dr. Baicker-McKee. "Small children aren't able to tell time yet," she notes. "So it's helpful to have a signal that one part of the day is done and another is just beginning." Make up a silly "secret" handshake to use when you reunite with your child, she suggests. Or play a hunting or guessing game: Put a token from your day -- a feather you found, a doodle on a Post-it, a small toy -- in a pocket and let your child search for it. Not only can this keep your kid occupied while you take a few minutes to do some food prep or simply relax, but it'll also make him feel like the focus is still on him.

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More Smart Solutions

Put your kids to work.

Get older children involved with food prep, whether they're playing sous-chef (helping with pouring and chopping) or waiter (helping set the table and serving up food). "Even if it doesn't reduce your workload much, it can reduce your resentment of having to do all the chores," says Dr. Baicker-McKee. "Plus, kids like to feel they are contributing to the household."

Feed young kids early.

"If they're starving and tired, why not feed them at 5:30 or even 4:30?" Dr. Markham says. That's a particularly good strategy when one partner gets home late or there's a babysitter on deck who can do it. Later, everyone can sit down for "family hour" -- parents eat dinner while children feast on fruit for dessert. "Kids get experience with family meals and can connect with both parents," says Dr. Markham, "but they are fed at a developmentally appropriate hour." (If the kids are always in bed by the time you and your spouse arrive home, don't sweat it; just be sure to share another meal, like breakfast.)

Change your expectations.

Knowing that witching-hour meltdowns are common -- and normal -- can make them easier to tolerate. "Put your kids' feelings into words and let them know you understand," says Dr. Baicker-McKee. "Empathy goes a long way." Cut yourself a little slack too; it just may not be the best time to teach your kids about the colors in the bean salad you're making, adds Jen Singer, author of *Stop Second-Guessing Yourself: The Toddler Years*. "Abandon your Mother-of-the-Year aspirations," she says, "and, if it comes to it, let the kids pull all the tissues out of the box and then stuff them back in later, anything to keep the peace and your sanity." Including the occasional glass of wine.

Ignore your phone.

Avoid the temptation to return calls, dive into e-mail, or sort mail after dinner. Just get everyone fed, says Dr. Markham. "Then you'll have all the more energy to tend to other tasks, including kids' chores."

Help kids decompress.

Little ones need to chill too, so engage them in a low-key activity, says Laura Dessauer, Ed.D., an art therapist in Sarasota, Florida. One idea: Let your kid do an art project at the table, like making a place mat, while you prepare dinner.

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