

Headbanging and Bodyrocking

WHAT IS HEADBANGING AND BODYROCKING?

Headbanging and bodyrocking are officially called rhythmic movement disorders. Rhythmic movement disorder usually involves some type of rocking, rolling, or headbanging. Oddly, children find this a soothing way to fall asleep. Your child probably does this most times that he is falling asleep, whether at naptime or bedtime. Furthermore, given that all children naturally wake frequently during the night, your child will need to headbang (or rock) to put himself back to sleep in the middle of the night. So, don't be surprised that this behavior occurs not only at bedtime but throughout the night.

SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S HEADBANGING OR BODYROCKING?

For almost all children, headbanging or bodyrocking is of no concern. It is a common way to fall asleep. There are some children for whom it may be of concern, though. Some children with other issues, such as developmental delay, autism, or blindness, will rock or bang their heads, and may hurt themselves. This type of behavior is substantially different and will occur both throughout the day and at night. If your child is normal and healthy during the day and only bangs his head to fall asleep, you should not be concerned. Also, if your child has a neurological or psychiatric problem, you will likely be aware of it from his behavior during the day.

HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD'S HEADBANGING OR BODYROCKING?

There is nothing much that you need to do if your child headbangs or rocks himself to sleep. Children often rock or bang their heads to fall asleep. This is normal. Most will eventually stop by 4 years of age. In the meantime, there are some things to consider:

- **Don't worry about trying to protect your child.** Even if your child is banging his head hard, it is unlikely that he will hurt himself. Thus, there is no need to put extra bumpers on the crib or place pillows in strategic places. Also, it rarely works. Most children will find a way to bang their heads, no matter what creative tricks you try.
- **Be careful not to reinforce the headbanging.** If you go in to your child every time he starts to rock or bang his head, you may be reinforcing his behavior without even realizing it. In this case, he may be headbanging to get your attention. Make sure that your child gets lots of attention during the day and ignore his headbanging at night.
- **Move the crib or bed.** Move the crib or the bed away from the wall if the banging or rocking is making noise and keeping the rest of the family awake. If your child is in a bed rather than a crib, put guardrails on all sides so he won't fall out of bed. If our child is making his crib or bed squeak, oil the screws and bolts.
- **Ensure your child's safety.** Be sure to tighten all screws and bolts on your child's crib or bed on a regular basis, as the rocking or headbanging can loosen them.

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Supported by an educational grant from 