AFTER 12 YEARS, A MOTHER RECLAIMS THE NIGHT

Adam Catt is a happy kid, sociable, and loves having people around. But somehow he arrived at the cusp of adolescence without having learnt how to sleep on his own.

"He couldn’t get to sleep," says his mother, Chris, a preschool teacher, who discovered that years of dispensing advice to parents were of no use when it came to helping her 12-year-old son. "He would go to bed at nine or 9.30 and you know, at 10.30, 11 o'clock, he wouldn’t be asleep. He would often fall into bed with his dad, which meant that I had to sleep in his [Adam’s] bed."

Like many people, Chris Catt had assumed that sleeping problems would end in toddler years. When Adam was awake for long periods as a baby she put that down to colic and to a sore tummy caused by lactose intolerance, and she would often bring him into bed with her. But as the years passed, he rarely managed a good night's sleep. Occasionally he would sleep soundly for short periods. But then the problem would recur; despite trying every conceivable aid, from heat-packs to teddy bears, nothing worked permanently. "It seems like it's been for ever," his mother says of the search for a good night's sleep. "It was horrendous. It was hard work, getting him sleeping in his own bed, getting him off to sleep."

Adam never seemed terribly tired, and his work at school was good. Even more strangely, he never had a problem sleeping over at friends' houses. But at home, in the solitude of his room, a good night's sleep was elusive. "We'd often be really cranky with each other because I was frustrated with him for calling out and not being able to get to sleep, and he was frustrated not being able to go to sleep."

So in July, Adam attended the sleep program at Flinders University in Adelaide. Using behavioural therapy, he slowly changed his sleep habits. At first he was allowed to stay in his parents' room, but only on a mattress. Then the mattress was left in the corridor, and if he couldn’t sleep he could drag it back into their room where he would have to make it up in the middle of the night.

Eventually he was happy in his own room, and he learnt to wait five minutes before getting up in the middle of the night. Before long he was not bothering to get up at all, if he even woke up.

Weeks on, Chris Catt is ecstatic that her son has been cured. "Absolutely, totally, utterly, unbelievably so," she says. "He just goes to bed at 9.30, except on the weekends. He might read for half an hour. I go in and say goodnight and that's all I hear from him." After so many years of sleep deprivation, she says, "I don’t have the stress any more... It’s amazing. You just feel better about yourself. He feels better about himself."

After 12 years she has finally reclaimed the night – and her bed.

Fiona Harari

Problem solved: Chris and Adam Catt.