

Easing the Transition from the Family Bed

From Co-Sleeping to Solo Sleeping

By Patti Teel

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The family bed, also called *co-sleeping*, is an extremely common practice in which babies and young children sleep with one or both of their parents. It's estimated that approximately 1/3 of American families frequently sleep together during all or part of the night. And throughout most of the world, co-sleeping is a way of life; it is the norm for 90% of the world's population. There has been a great deal of research suggesting that it is *normal* and *healthy*.

But many experts are not open-minded on the issue. In fact, according to some physicians, co-sleeping will have fostered an unhealthy dependence, harmed marriages, and increased the probability of sleep disorders. Other physicians deliver the opposite message, saying that co-sleeping makes a baby or child feel loved, secure and comfortable.

It is important for parents to decide for themselves whether co-sleeping is an option that suits their lives and that they are comfortable with. While some parents wouldn't dream of letting their babies and young children sleep with them, others couldn't imagine letting their babies and young children "cry it out" and fall asleep alone. The family bed is not for everyone, but it is a viable option. Let's acknowledge that we are all individuals who have different temperaments, opinions, and approaches to parenting.

Even if you are a proponent of the family bed, there will come a

time when your child will need to sleep by himself. My rule of thumb is that when anyone in the family bed is uncomfortable, or is having their own sleep compromised, it's time for the child to sleep on his own. After co-sleeping with their parents for a period of time, many children decide on their own that it's time to sleep in their own beds. But oftentimes, children find it difficult to fall asleep independently after having become accustomed to co-sleeping with their parent(s). The same is true for children who receive assistance in the form of back rubs, etc. This is not an insurmountable problem. But parents should realize that in order to make a smooth transition from co-sleeping to solo sleeping, they must gradually and systematically reduce their attention while children are *taught* to relax themselves to sleep.

Unfortunately, most sleep experts don't seem to realize that many parents are looking for advice after having shared their bed or assisted their child to fall asleep for months or even years. Parents are often routinely advised to abruptly withdraw their attention at bedtime with no mention of teaching children self-soothing skills. This sets the scene for bedtime battles and leaves parents feeling frustrated and defeated.

Let me offer you some reassurance. When you decide that the time is right, you can help your child to make an easy transition from the family bed. You teach your child many things, not the least of which is to become an independent sleeper who will proudly be able to say, "I can go to sleep by myself." And once your child falls asleep independently, he will be much less likely to get up in the middle of the night. For while night wakening is normal, children who are able to fall asleep by themselves at bedtime are more likely to be able to fall back asleep when they briefly awaken during the night.

Tips to help children transition from the family bed and learn to fall asleep independently without tears, trauma, or tantrums:

- During the bedtime routine, have your child practice relaxation techniques such as progressive relaxation, attending to the breath, and visualization.
- Gradually remove yourself from your child's room when it's time for him to go to sleep. At first, sit on the edge of his bed while he relaxes himself to sleep. (This is a good time for children to listen to a relaxation recording such as *The Floppy Sleep Game*, *The Inside Out Blessing Game*, or *The Christmas Dream*.) Over a period of several days, sit further and further from your child—giving less and less attention, until he no longer needs you in the room to fall asleep.
- Be sure you're dedicated to helping your child take this important step towards independence. Be consistent—don't waffle back and forth, letting your child sleep with you at times and other times not. Try to be patient; it may take a week or two for your child to learn to relax and independently fall asleep.

Dubbed "The Dream Maker" by People magazine, Patti Teel is a former teacher and the author of *The Floppy Sleep Game Book*, which includes a 4 week program to help children become independent sleepers. She is holding Dream Academy workshops at schools, hospitals, and libraries across the country where parents and children learn the playful relaxation techniques from her book and widely acclaimed children's audio series. Children at the Dream Academy workshops practice the three R's by resting their bodies, relaxing their minds, and refreshing their spirits. www.pattiteel.com

