Normal Parent Behaviors and Why They Won’t Hurt Your Child

My child is still sleeping in our bed.

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Normal Infant Sleep Part 3

Many parents who sleep with their child get comments along the lines of, "Your child will never leave if you don’t move them" or "What about your sex life?". Parents end up questioning if they are doing the right thing for their child. Or they wonder if they will end up with a 16-year-old who still wants to crawl into bed with mom and dad every night. First, let’s address the question of when a child leaves the bed. Rest assured that your child will not be dragging you off to college so they can still sleep with you even if you don’t force them out of the bed.

The age at which a child is ready to move into their own room varies widely and bedsharing is quite common worldwide. Notably, bedsharing rates in Scandinavian countries and Asian countries are much higher than those in the US or Canada (Mindell, Sadeh, Wiegand, How, & Goh, 2010; Nelson & Taylor, 2001; Welles-Nystrom, 2005; for a review, see Cassels, 2013). Parents polled by one of the authors about the age at which their child initiated the move to another room report ages as young as 18 months and as old as 10 years.

Some factors that influence the transition age include: having a sibling in the other room (thus being able to room-share with another child), the presence of a new baby in the bed (and needed attention to safety for the new baby and disrupted sleep for the older child), and the child’s own developmental needs. Each family will need to consider the factors that are relevant for their particular child. No one should tell a family that they must stop the family bed if it is working for them. Importantly, the research on extended bedsharing has not found any social, emotional, or cognitive detriment for bedsharing children relative to children who were placed in their own room in infancy (e.g., Abel, Park, Tipene-Leach, Finau, & Lennan, 2001; Barajas, Martin, Brooks-Gunn, & Hale, 2011; Keller & Goldberg, 2004; Okamli, Weisner, & Olmstead, 2002).

The second issue that is often brought up is to do with the marital relationship when the family bed is utilized. New research looking at bedsharing and marital satisfaction has reported no influence of bedsharing on the marital relationship when bedsharing is intentional (Messmer, Miller, & Yu, 2012). When bedsharing is in reaction to child
sleep problems, parents may report greater stress on their relationship, but it is likely that this is due to the problems associated with infant sleep problems. As to intimacy, parents of co-sleepers and bed-sharing often find creative ways to make sure their needs are met as well. There are excellent (and humorous) blogs on the topic if you're in need of some extra assistance.

Previous posts in this mini-series: PART 1, PART 2.

Next posts in this mini-series: PART 4, PART 5

Posts in Sleep Series:

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'Let Crying Babies Cry?' So Wrong

Simple Ways to Calm a Crying Baby

Normal, Human Infant Sleep: Feeding Method and Development

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Also, check out: Dangers of "Crying It Out"

Co-Authors

Tracy Cassella, University of British Columbia, www.evolutionaryparenting.com

Sarah Ockwell-Smith, babycalming.com

Wendy Middlemiss, University of North Texas

John Hoffman, uncommjonjnh.wordpress.com

Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Texas Tech University, http://www.uprightsciencechick.com/sleep.html

Helen Stevens, Safe Sleep Space

James McKenna, Mother-Baby Behavioral Sleep Laboratory, University of Notre Dame, www.co-sleeping.nd.edu

References