



by Karen Stephens

Infant Crying, Preschoolers Getting Out of Bed, the Family Bed

Not every child's bedtime routine goes smoothly. Here are some questions I've received from parents, along with my responses. I hope they will help you address your own questions and family situation.

Does sleep do more than keep my child's mood sunnier?

Absolutely. During sleep children's growth hormone is released. Body tissue growth won't develop as easily or on schedule if a child doesn't get enough daily sleep. Kids can also cooperate better when well-rested. Brain processes that contribute to alertness, attention to detail, and short-term memory operate more effectively when children are nourished with quality sleep.

Is it a good idea to let an infant cry it out after being placed in a crib to sleep?

Dealing with a baby's crying is very different from dealing with a toddler or a two year old. With babies, the goal is to help them learn to relax into sleep. They need parents nearby, but the parents must also give children enough time to learn how to put themselves to sleep. Widely known parent adviser, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton recommends that parents resist jumping at the first sound of a baby's whimper. Sometimes those are the sounds of the baby trying to get comfortable enough for sleep. Interrupting them prematurely merely wakes the infant.

However, when babies become so distressed that wails come out, Dr. Brazelton and I agree. Going in to comfort and reassure the baby is humane and loving. As Brazelton says in his book *Touchpoints*: "I don't think any baby ever needs to cry it out over anything. Being left to cry it out doesn't teach a baby anything except that his parents can desert him when he needs them."

Are there ways to keep children from getting in and out of their own bed?

This is often a favorite game of toddlers and two year olds. Getting out of a crib or bed on their own gives them the chance to demonstrate growing strength and motor coordination. They take great pride in asserting independence and maturing self-help skills, too. And don't underestimate the thrill kids get out of teasing and tricking parents with bedtime antics. Once the novelty of independently getting out of bed wears off, most kids willingly stay put.

Some children continue getting up due to fears or inability to calm down after rowdy play prior to bedtime. Deal with the underlying reason and you will likely solve your roamer's bed-hopping problem. Re-stating expectations and consequences and consistently following them help, too. For stubborn kids, firmly and calmly give a choice: "You may walk back to bed or I'll carry you. Which do you choose?"

Some parents use reverse psychology with kids who stray from bed. A parent will say, "Don't go back to bed, whatever you do. No matter how sleepy you are, stay here with me and help me read the newspaper." Or, "Your stuffed animals are getting lonely sleeping alone in your room. You better go back and keep them company." Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

What's up with the "family bed?"

The family bed or kids co-sleeping with parents is not uncommon at all — at least not around the world. It is, however, uncommon in the United States. For convenience tiny

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infants may sleep in their parents' bed or in a bassinet in their parents' bedroom (especially if an infant is breast-fed). However, by the time baby reaches 4 months, most infants are sleeping alone in a crib. For parents who value independence and self-reliance, having children sleep alone is another way of building these values.

In other cultures, especially those that value group harmony, cooperation, and inter-connectedness, a family bed is more the norm. In Japan, children often sleep between mother and father, or at least with mom, until they are five or six years of age. Mayan mothers believe a closer parent-child bond is established through co-sleeping. In the United States, African-American and Appalachian cultures are much more open to co-sleeping as well.

"Experts" are divided on the family bed issue. Some believe it invites children's dependence, increased sleep problems (for parents and kids), and invites sexual abuse of children. Danger of child suffocation is also mentioned. Other experts believe the family bed promotes a sense of belonging, oneness, safety, and security for all family members. What experts usually do agree on is that a clear decision should be made one way or the other. Having children bounce back and forth between their own bed and the family bed is just too confusing and inconsistent for kids. Having it both ways, depending on a parent's mood, seems to create, rather than reduce, sleep problems.

Clearly, the decision about a family bed should be well thought out; and it should be decided when a child is still an infant. Mom and dad should anticipate the pros and cons that will exist during each stage of their child's life. For instance, what happens when more than one child is in the family? How would different bed times be handled? Where and when would parents' sexual relations take place? And here's the real nitty-gritty practical parenting question: If a child wets the bed, who will get everyone up and then change the sheets?

The advisability of a family bed often lies in the REASONS parents have for choosing it. If parents let a child into their bed to bribe a child into good behavior, it's not a good strategy. If a child refuses to separate emotionally from a parent — or visa versa, it's also not a good solution. Having a child sleep in the parent's bed because a parent feels guilty for working outside of the home isn't reasonable. And a family bed shouldn't be chosen just to keep a parent from feeling isolated and lonely.

I'm sure you have others questions I haven't addressed. So following are other resources that can assist you.

Books

- *Sleeping Through the Night: How Infants, Toddlers and Their Parents Can Get a Good Night's Sleep* by Jodi A. Mindell, Ph.D. New York: Harper-Collins, 1997.
- *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child: A step-by-step program for a good night's sleep* by Marc Weissbluth, MD. New York: Ballentine Publisher, 1999.
- *The Sleep Book for Tired Parents: Help Solving Children's Sleep Problems* by Rebecca Huntley. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, 1991.
- *Becoming the Parent You Want To Be: A Sourcebook of Strategies for the First Five Years* by Laura Davis and Janis Keyser. New York: Broadway Books, 1997.
- *Touchpoints: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development* by T. Berry Brazelton, MD. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1992.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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