



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

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Sleeping in own bed

What's the best time to move my child out of our family bed and into her own bed?

There's no prescribed "right" time to move a child out of a family bed, nor any rule that says "a child must be in her own bed by age 3."

Make the change when you and your child are ready to — not because you're following some arbitrary deadline. Having another baby on the way, wanting more privacy, and feeling that everyone will sleep better separately are all perfectly legitimate reasons for wanting to end this sleeping arrangement.

But keep in mind that the toddler and preschool years are a tumultuous time. So if your child is currently toilet training, giving up the pacifier, beginning preschool, or hitting any other major milestone, consider waiting on this one.

"It's best not to make your child deal with more than one change at a time, if you can help it," says BabyCenter sleep expert Jodi Mindell, author of *Sleeping Through the Night*.

How do I start the process?

When the timing seems right, start with a few small changes. The idea is to gradually wean your child from the family bed, so she doesn't feel as if she's being abruptly kicked out (and by the people she loves most in the world!).



If she still naps, have her nap in her own room, to give her practice sleeping solo there during the less-intimidating daylight hours. For nights, you can put a futon or a mattress on the floor at the foot of your bed. Tell your child that someday she'll spend the night in her big-kid bed in her own room, but that for now this is her special bed — giving her the security of being close to you while also getting her accustomed to independent sleeping.

If your child doesn't have a comfort object, like a teddy bear, blanket, or baby doll, try offering her one now and encouraging her to sleep with it. At this age, she may not take to a comfort object if she's never used one before. But if she does, it'll help her make the final move to her own bed — after all, she may be forced to leave you behind, but no one can stop her from taking her "Beary" with her.

After a few weeks, explain to your child that it's time for her to sleep in her room at night, and remind her that you'll be right next door (or down the hall) if she needs you.



Another alternative, suggests Mindell, is to move your child straight into her own room but to sleep with her there for the first week or two while she gets adjusted.

"Once she's sleeping well in her new space, move yourself out very gradually," says Mindell. Go from lying down with her to sitting next to her as she falls asleep, then from sitting on the bed to sitting on the floor, and finally move from the floor to the door.

It's important to be consistent so that your child knows what to expect and has time to get used to the new routine.

What should I do if my child resists moving to her own bed?

Over the next few months, you may wear out the carpet between your room and your child's. But you have to expect protests and middle-of-the-night visits — it's only natural for her to continue to seek comfort from you at night, especially if she's had the security of sleeping with you since birth. So decide what your priority is.

If your priority is to not be woken, keep the extra mattress on your bedroom floor for a while, so that your child can wander in and go back to sleep there if she wants.

If your priority is to get your child to remain in her room through the night — and if you're willing to lose some sleep to accomplish this — then do away with the extra mattress. When your child comes into your room, calmly lead her back to her bed and sit with her for a few minutes. (Repeat as often as necessary.)



You can encourage an upbeat attitude about her new sleeping quarters by letting your child decorate her room with favorite stuffed animals and toys, her own drawings on the walls, and a night light (or two). Make your child's new room his/her sanctuary, somewhere they want to go to. Don't ever use the child's bedroom for discipline purposes i.e sending them to their room if they misbehave.

Talk up and celebrate this transition as the big graduation that it really is, complete with balloons, cake, and gifts of new bedding featuring her favorite characters. Then inaugurate opening night with a peaceful-but-simple bedtime ritual that you'll be able to stick with (for example, a bath, a story, a song, and a few minutes of cuddling).

If your child has a sibling, even a baby sister or brother, consider letting them share a room. They may whoop it up for the first few nights, but soon enough they'll settle down and provide each other with the company and comfort they need to make it through the night.

- 1. Communicate.** Make sure your child understands your new expectations well before bedtime. Do not use the middle of the night as a time for negotiating. Set out your expectations well in advance.
- 2. Acknowledge your child's fears and anxieties.** Do not downplay how hard this might be. You can offer empathy while maintaining your boundaries. Think of things that can offer comfort during the transition: a CD of your child's favorite songs, a brighter nightlight, or a flashlight and a book may offer a bit of a distraction.
- 3. Make sure to provide extra comfort, affection, and attention during the day.** If your child's only connection or cuddling happens at bedtime, they will be less likely to want to give up that special time. Offer a time of cuddling on the sofa and maybe even a little more time in the evening to fill up their need for affection.
- 4. Use a chart and offer rewards.** Perhaps your child can earn a special outing or a reward after a night/week of staying in their own bed.
- 5. Determine the right time to start.** Are there other transitions going on? It might be worth it to wait a week or two if there are already big things going on in your child's life.

Transition With a Tent -- Yup, this is mine. My daughter really didn't want to leave my room, but I desperately wanted to sleep without taking a foot to the nose every night. So we started with a compromise; she could stay in our room but couldn't sleep in our bed. We set up a kid's tent at the foot of our bed and let her "camp" out each night. After she'd started to get used to it, we moved the tent out of our room and into hers. She continued to sleep there for a few weeks, but each day I would move her stuffies and blankets into her bed. She'd move them back into the tent each night until the day she realized that was a huge pain and just stayed in bed with them.

Banish the Monsters -- Some kids don't want to sleep in their room because they're scared; so find out what it is they're afraid of! Sometimes it's as simple as spraying the room with "monster spray" (a spray bottle of water works or some calming linen spray). My cousin and his wife actually moved the furniture around in their son's room to get rid of spooky shadows. Another mom whose daughter was afraid of the dark compromised with a soft light that wouldn't interrupt her sleep but made her feel a little more comfortable.

Make a Reward Chart -- Hey, it works for potty training, right? Reward each night spent in bed with a sticker, and after a full week of sleeping in their own room, they win a prize.

Put Them Back in Bed -- This is a tough one, but several parents I know swear it works. Each time they get out of bed, carry them back and calmly place them in their bed. The key word here is calmly. Don't yell. Don't nag.

In fact, don't say a WORD. Realizing they aren't getting your attention -- even negative attention -- can really cut down on night-time wandering.

Stay in the Room Until They Fall Asleep -- This is a trick that takes a lot of time, but several moms I know would stay in their child's room until the toddler fell asleep. The trick? Each night, they would move farther and farther away from the child's bed. So night one, they were right there by their side. Night two, halfway across the room. Night three, in the doorway. Night four, outside the room with the door open. And so on. With this process, it's also key NOT to yell or engage with your tot. They need to know it's bedtime, not talk to Mommy time.

Shut the Door -- Now, I don't mean lock it (that's mean), but one mom admitted she kept the door to her son's room open because she thought it would make him feel better. But after weeks of him coming out over and over, she realized the open door was distracting him from sleeping! He could see shadows from the TV down the hall and hear his parents talking (even when they thought they were keeping it down).

Whatever you decided to do, develop the strategy that is right for your family, and then stick to it. The one area where experts agree is that waffling only leads to more issues. If sleeping in your bed is not allowed at 10pm, but it's allowed at 3am, your child will probably develop the habit of waking just to join you when he knows the time is right. So, be prepared for a bumpy ride, but keep your eyes on the prize: one less elbow in your back at night!



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