

BY DIANA TENNESSEN

**Y**ou've heard the advice before: "Don't take your child into bed with you. It's not good for the child or the parents." If you're one of the many parents who do it anyway—and surveys have found that some 25 to 30 percent of parents routinely let their children sleep with them, either for part or all of the night—you can sleep a little easier now. Some pediatricians and sleep researchers are beginning to challenge this conventional wisdom. They contend that sleeping with a child isn't necessarily detrimental to the child's development, and note that in many cultures around the world, sharing sleep is the norm.

You should be aware, however, that cozy as sleeping together can be, it does raise specific concerns. Here are the most common worries and how the experts address them.

**Once you let your child into your bed, you'll never get him out again.** Never? No. But it may take a long time. Be prepared to spend several months or more easing the child out of your bed.

Some ages and stages are easier than others for convincing your child that his bed is just as nice as yours. One good time to make the transition is before he is 9



Many experts say that removing all pillows and comforters makes your bed safe for Baby.

# The family bed

Should you allow your child to sleep with you?

## Bunking with Baby

The SIDS Alliance offers the following safety tips for parents who wish to sleep in the same bed with babies, especially those under 6 months of age.

- If you smoke, never sleep with your baby. Even smoke residue on the parents' pajamas or in the family bed, or smoke in the room's air, increases the risk of sudden infant death syndrome.
- Make sure your baby sleeps on his back or side on a firm, flat mattress. The bed should be clear of pillows, comforters, and other thick, soft items, which can pose a suffocation hazard.
- Don't share sleep with your baby on a water bed, sheepskin, or feather bed.
- Avoid overheating or over-bundling your baby. The shared body heat that comes with sharing a bed should be taken into consideration.

months old. From the ages of around 9 months to a year, intense separation anxiety sets in, and it becomes much more difficult to pry the child out of your bed. For this reason parents should "think about what they want to be doing with a 2- or 3-year-old, and lay down the necessary sleep practices within those first six to nine months," recommends Betsy Lozoff, M.D., a pediatrician at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, who began studying cosleeping practices in the United States about 15 years ago.

Another "easier" time to make the transition to solitary sleeping is toward the end of the second year, when the intense attachment to and separation anxiety from parents ease up, says William Sears, M.D., a pediatrician in San Clemente, California, and coauthor of *The Baby Book* (Little, Brown). (For advice on how to encourage solitary sleeping, see below.)

**Sleeping together will make your child overly dependent on you.** Wrong. There's no scientific evidence to support this long-standing belief. In fact, no long-term studies have ever examined the effects of shared sleeping on independence, according

to James McKenna, Ph.D., an anthropologist at Pomona College, in Claremont, California, who has studied the sleep patterns of infants and young children for the past ten years.

The bottom line, points out McKenna, is that the recommendation in this country that children sleep alone because it "promotes independence" is based largely on cultural preferences, not scientific evidence.

**Sleeping with a baby carries an increased risk of suffocation.** Very rarely. In the five-year period between 1985 and 1990, some 250 babies suffocated while sleeping in an adult or junior bed, according to the National Safe Kids Campaign. However, those statistics aren't broken down by cause, and many experts say that as long as you remove pillows and comforters, are not under the influence of alcohol, medications, or other drugs, and follow other basic safety precautions (see "Bunking With Baby"), the risk of suffocation is minimized. Incidents of overlying, in which a parent rolls over and smothers a baby, are rare. Still, some parents prefer to put a bassinet in their room so they can be close to the baby without worrying.

Researchers are also exploring whether there may be a connection between sleeping together and SIDS. While some studies have found a correlation between SIDS and babies who sleep with a parent who smokes, some researchers are now investigating whether sharing sleep may actually help protect against SIDS. They suggest that the frequent arousals and more fragmented sleep patterns associated with sharing a bed may have survival value in babies, preventing them from sleeping too deeply before their nervous system has matured enough to arouse them during a life-threatening apnea episode (in which the baby momentarily stops breathing).

**Sharing sleep can lead to marital problems and put a damper on your sex life.**

Maybe. "If both parents agree it's okay for the children to come into their bed, sharing sleep usually doesn't contribute to marital conflict," says Lozoff. In our house the use of sleep-teaching methods, in which you don't immediately respond to a baby's cries, caused much more

friction between my husband and me than allowing our children into our bed. One reason is that my husband is from India, where children routinely sleep with their mothers "until the next one comes along."

Of course, in some families having children in the parental bed is a way of avoiding sexual intimacy. If there's tension in your marriage, having your child in the bed with you is not going to help you. Lozoff also cautions that when you bring

your child into your bed to solve her "sleep problem"—whether it's bedtime battles or nighttime awakenings—it can sometimes make matters worse, especially if you're inconsistent about it and don't really want her there. "Parents often discover that they're in it for the long haul, not just for a few days or a few weeks," she says.

What about your sex life? Yes, it can take a nosedive when children are in the same room with you. If you feel uncomfortable making love with a baby in the room, or if you have an older child in bed with you, take your sleeping child out of the room while you make love. Or make love somewhere other than your bedroom.

If you do choose to be present during your child's passage to sleep, rest assured you're not alone. The bottom line, says Sears, is that "there is no right or wrong place for a child to sleep. The right sleeping arrangement is one where all family members sleep best." □

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## Easing a child out of your bed

Start by putting a futon or toddler mattress on the floor at the foot of your bed. Once the child becomes accustomed to sleeping on the mattress, move it closer to the door and finally into her room. At first you may find it helpful to remain in the child's room with her as she falls asleep. Over the next several nights, move farther away from the bed until you

finally work your way right out the door.

Play up the idea of having a "big kid's bed." Let her help pick out her special bed at the store. If you already have a bed for your child, let her pick out some special sheets.

If there are siblings in the house, try having the children sleep in

the same room together. While one sibling can interfere with another's sleep, they often comfort each other.

If your child is scared at night, you may have to go into her room with her and stay there until she is either asleep or no longer afraid.



To counter nighttime fears, stay in her room until she falls asleep.