

## **It's okay to kick kids out of your bed!**

### **Sleeping alone promotes kids' independence and reduces anxiety**

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#### Relationship between co-sleeping and anxious kids

Sleeping next to a parent's familiar, warm body at night may seem like it would reduce kids' anxiety, but research suggests that it can actually hinder independence and increase anxiety in other areas of functioning. Co-sleepers have been found to have a higher level of behavioral and emotional problems generally, and their parents have higher distress than other groups. There is a reciprocal relationship between anxiety and sleep, and frequent co-sleeping poses a risk of maintaining anxiety via disrupted sleep. Therefore, promoting independent sleep has many potential benefits, including improved adjustment and self-confidence.

Co-sleeping (sleeping in the same bed as a parent) is common in anxious school-aged children and is related to other forms of clinical anxiety. More children with anxiety have been found to sleep with their parents compared to children without anxiety, and higher symptom severity has been found to be related to more frequent co-sleeping. Co-sleeping kids tend to experience more sleep-related difficulties (such as trouble getting to sleep, more daytime sleepiness, more bedtime resistance, later sleep onset, and increased nighttime awakenings) and greater levels of sleep anxiety. The period leading up to bedtime may be particularly stressful for anxious kids who have self-soothing trouble, resulting in more brain and body restlessness. Parents may give in to sleep-related resistance, with the thought, "At least they are getting some sleep." The American Academy of Pediatrics reported that co-sleeping has safety risks and can potentially hamper the development of self-reliance.

#### Benefits of independent sleep

It is understandable why parents co-sleep with their anxious children. Parents want to relieve the distress their child is experiencing because the whole family needs sleep, and everyone experiences relief in being together. However, co-sleeping is only a short-term relief to a child's sleep anxiety. While it feels like the right choice because it reduces the child's anxiety enough to fall asleep, it maintains anxiety over time, leading to the same challenges at bedtime night after night. Letting a child sleep in their parents' bed is one of the most used and most interfering forms of parental accommodation. The skills learned through independent sleep provide long-term relief from anxiety.

When a child can fall asleep on their own, it demonstrates their ability to regulate their emotions by calming themselves without their parent's presence. It provides children the opportunity to practice handling their distress independently instead of relying on their parents. Learning to sleep independently reduces nighttime awakenings and promotes self-soothing. Once children learn that they can sleep independently and handle their sleep anxiety, they can use those skills in the daytime anxieties they face.

#### Tips for parents

- Develop a consistent bedtime routine – basic elements for going-to-bed procedure should be the same in the child's bedroom
- Turn off screens – television, video games, computers, phones, etc. should be turned off an hour before bedtime

- Create positive associations with sleep – bedtime story, prayers, soft music, or snuggle time in the child’s bed
- Find a transitional object – have a comfort item such as dressing a teddy bear in a parent’s tee-shirt
- Set boundaries - remain calm and matter-of-fact when returning a child to their bed, limiting the pleas for “just one more” story or other nighttime activity
- Use a check-in approach – allow a few minutes of self-calming in the child’s bed while the parent leaves but returns, increasing intervals
- Provide morning rewards – incentives for independent sleep may provide additional motivation and opportunities for praise

Empathetic parents feel anxious when their kids are anxious and will do about anything to keep that from happening, including engaging in co-sleeping. However, sometimes when attempting to keep their kids happy in the short term, problems can be created in the long term. The good news: children are resilient, adaptable, and thrive on consistency. They will benefit from self-reliance when sleeping independently, a gift from parents that will be long-lasting and may promote confidence in other areas of their lives.