



sleeping together

What you need to know about the family bed

BY ▶ JEANNE MUCHNICK

Want to rock the boat? Start a discussion about the family bed at your next childbirth class. You're guaranteed to ignite a heated debate. For some new parents, sleeping with their newborns is as natural as childbirth itself and an easy way to handle the challenges of nighttime parenting. Other moms and dads see sharing the bed with your child as disruptive to marital relations, not to mention a poor sleep habit to indulge in your child.

You'll find that experts, too, are on both sides of the fence. Williams Sears, M.D., who is widely published and

known as one of the gurus of modern parenting, is an advocate for sleeping with your baby, arguing that it's an ideal way to connect and give your infant the security she needs—plus cope with middle-of-the-night nursing. Many of his colleagues, however, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, popular parenting writers T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., and Barton Schmitt, M.D., and the authors of the *What to Expect* series, are against it, citing studies that show it increases the risk of suffocation and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Yet a shared sleep environment has

been a common practice in many places around the world and, as breastfeeding increases in popularity, is becoming more typical in the United States—although many parents won't admit to it.

THE CHOICE TO SHARE

Jenn Berman, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist, author of *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids*, and a new mom herself, says that although there are many families who choose to bed-share for philosophical reasons that work for them, "Frequently families choose co-sleeping out of desperation

for a good night's sleep or by default, not necessarily because they have a belief in the family bed."

That's what happened with new mom Jane Carpenter of Westford, MA. She says she tried to follow the advice in the parenting books and magazines she had read, which said "no" to the family bed, but, in the end, decided she just had to adapt to her baby's rhythm and needs. At first, Carpenter says she'd get up each night and sit in a rocker at 3 or 4 a.m., nurse her child, and then try to get her daughter back to sleep in her crib.

"It was really tortuous for me, as I was so sleep-deprived that I was falling out of the rocker each night," Carpenter says. And so she brought her daughter into bed and found "it was really nice to have my baby snuggled up next to me and everyone happy."

HAVING A PLAN

While some new parents prefer to wing it and see what works best after baby arrives, licensed master social worker Jill Spivack, co-author of *The Sleepy Solution*, strongly urges thinking ahead to avoid stress and marital discord. "Men sometimes resent the baby in

bed when they can't be as intimate with their wife or when they feel pushed out or alienated," Spivack says. "For women who are co-sleeping not out of choice, but by default, they can end up feeling resentful when they have to parent 24 hours a day and don't have any downtime," she adds.

Spivack suggests that before you and your mate consider the family bed, you ask yourselves some hard questions, such as: Does one of us need more physical space while sleeping? Can we think of creative ways to connect as a couple at other times of day? Parents who decide to co-sleep—whether this is defined as sharing the room with baby, or the actual bed—need to find a time and place to be intimate. "If parents don't protect their connect-time for years at a time, they may wind up feeling very disconnected years later," Spivack says.

That's why the family bed works for people like Nancy Marmolejo of Anaheim, CA, whose flexible work schedule means she and her husband don't have to rely on just evenings for time together. Nancy Wahler of Westport, CT, on the other hand, admits she needs some space at the end of the day, not to mention that her

WHAT MOMS SAY

Never in a million years would I ever believe I'd have a "family bed," but we do. It just something we fell into after the first two nights at home when our baby couldn't fall asleep. At first I was embarrassed to tell people, but I'm now I'm OK. A lot of people out there do it, although they don't all admit to it.

—Nancy Mace Jackson, Atlanta

I would rather be sleep-deprived than start the family-bed trend.

—Karen Wright, Mankato, MN

This family bed/co-sleeping topic had me all stressed out because I didn't know what was 'right' or 'best.' Now, Madison, who is 6 months old, sleeps in her crib, but that didn't start until she was 3 months.

—Jenny Mackie, Pembroke Pines, FL

I think as a parent you need your space and your sleep and that's harder to get when there's a baby in bed with you.

—Roxana Agler, Crestwood, IL

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husband "feels a bit left out. To bring our baby into bed with us would just make that worse," she says.

SAFETY ISSUES

There are other concerns if you decide on the family bed. James Kemp, M.D., an associate professor of pediatrics at Missouri's Saint Louis University and a world-recognized SIDS researcher, explains that infants can become wedged beneath an adult's body, underneath the covers, or in crevices in furniture. Kemp, however, distinguishes between room-sharing and bed-sharing. While he's strongly against the latter, he says that

BED-SHARING HELPERS

The Arm's Reach Bedside Co-Sleeper (armsreach.com, \$192) is a unique mini-bed that lets you have baby next to you, but not in your bed; it also works as a bassinet.

The First Years by Learning Curve Close & Secure Sleeper (pictured; learningcurve.com, \$40) is similar, but goes in the bed. It's padded, light, and easy to fold, which helps when traveling.



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"separate but proximate" sleep may be the best of both worlds. "Statistically, for a baby on its back, the safest place is in the parents' room but on a separate sleep surface that is safe for babies," he stresses.

A 2005 review of studies by anthropologist James J. McKenna, Ph.D., author of the new book *Sleeping with Your Baby: A Parent's Guide to Cosleeping* and director of the Mother-Baby Behavioral Sleep Laboratory at University of Notre Dame in Indiana, shows that babies and mothers wake more easily when sleeping in the same environment and that such an arrangement facilitates breastfeeding and is protective against SIDS.

"Although it is sometimes inconvenient to the parent, it is completely normal for babies to wake up at night—indeed, being able to wake up out of a deep sleep is thought by some to be an important factor in SIDS prevention," says Melissa Burnham, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Human Development and Family Studies department at University of Nevada, Reno, and the co-author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Sleep Training for Your Child*.

This is why a co-sleeper that rests in the bed or attaches to its side (see "Bed-Sharing Helpers," left) or a bassinet or crib in the room may be the best compromise. You can always transition baby to her own room later, when you're ready to do so, say at 3 or 4 months.

If you do decide that the best place for baby is with you in bed, talk to your pediatrician about how and where baby is sleeping. There are guidelines for safer co-sleep that can't be ignored: Place baby on her back to sleep; use a light blanket or sheet; don't smoke or use any substances that can decrease your sensitivity to the baby, such as drugs or alcohol; don't use a bed that has rail slats or spaces between the mattress and headboard or wall; and never place baby on or near a pillow. ▶

Jeanne Muchnick writes about parenting for *Women's Day* and *ClubMom.com*. Before a deadline, she must sleep alone or she's too cranky to do her job.

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