

February 2007

Topic:

## How do I get my 8-year-old back into his own bed?

**Question:** Our son still sleeps with us at night and he is 8 years old now. We want him to sleep in his own room and have our bed and privacy back. What can we do?

From, Three's a Crowd

**Answer:** Great wakeup call for parents. There are likely many parents reading this that have just started on this slippery slope – so parents of toddlers listen up! The story usually goes like this...

### Once Upon a Time

These stories usually have their beginnings way back in the diaper stage when our children are very young and we are very weak. We want our sleep and our children want us. We attempt many times to take them back to their rooms but they kick up a real fuss, so we give in to avoid another grueling, sleepless night. And if there's another sleeping child in the house, we cave in even faster! So we convince ourselves there's no harm (actually it might even feel good to have their cuddly bodies close to us) in letting them away with it – just for tonight.

### Eight Years Later...

Parents have spent countless nights in their child's bunk bed or have huddled on the edge of the marriage bed dodging the flailing limbs of their child. The parents are resentful and have lost contact with one another.

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What has the child learned? Here are two common outcomes:

1. I am entitled and have power over my parents, and I get what I want. I have no respect for my parents' right to privacy or to their own space.
2. I am incapable of handling my nights alone. I am dependent on others. I **need** my parents.

Neither sounds too healthy. Right?

## Goals

1. Teach him about respect for the rights of others. Moms and dad have rights too!
2. Develop your son's sense of independence and self-reliance. Help him believe in himself – make him see that he can handle his own situations. He can manage to sleep on his own.

## Smart Solutions

### 1. Check in on your own beliefs

Do you believe you have the right to time alone, your own bed, an uninterrupted sleep? Is that a yes? Well, you'd better say it loud and clear, for you'll need that conviction to complete the following steps.

### 2. Problem -solving

Begin by telling him this sleeping arrangement is no longer working for you and your partner and that you want to work out a solution that is respectful of all.

Then roll up your sleeves and have a calm discussion. Ask your son what he enjoys about sleeping in your bed, and what he doesn't enjoy about sleeping in his bed. Listen without comment. Summarize what you heard to make sure you are both clear on his issues.

Something helpful usually comes out of this. Often the problem starts out as a legitimate “fear,” indicated by statements like: “*I want to be near you.*” “*I don’t like to be alone.*” or “*I’m scared in my room.*” Now the problem has turned into a bad habit. But habits can be changed – it just takes commitment and time.

Together, if possible, develop a few alternative solutions that don’t include his being in your bed. If he won’t contribute ideas, that’s okay. The process will teach him 1) how to resolve conflicts compatibly; 2) his parents have self-respect and they have rights too.

### **Possible Solutions:**

- Your first priority is to help him with his belief that he can’t handle sleeping alone. Assure him you have confidence he can handle nighttime in his own bed. Yes, it will likely be uncomfortable for a while, but this will pass.
- State your conviction to see this through. Ensure he understands that this decision has nothing to do with your love for him, but rather is about your wish to have your own space and an uninterrupted sleep. There will be no going back!
- Consider together what would make his room more comfortable – things such as a body pillow for him to curl up to in bed, a picture of his parents on his bedside table, a lamp with a dimmer switch that he can control, a CD player so he can listen to stories to help him settle, etc.
- Establish a bedtime routine that is consistent.
- Let him know that nighttime is for rest and you will not be available for any talk.
- And, should he get out of bed in the night, the following are two popular approaches to consider. But use your creativity if neither suits. Just remember, be respectful of yourself and your son. The key is to let him know ahead of time what you will do if he persists in coming out of his room. And then follow through! Option: Include him in the decision-making if you’re willing to be flexible.

- 1. The cold turkey method:** If he leaves his room, take him by the hand and gently lead him back without words. At the most you will say in a kind and firm voice: *"I love you and I will see you in the morning."* You may have to return him a number of times.

If he persists, you close your door (not his). Tell him, *"I'm sorry to have to close the door, but I need my rest. I love you and I look forward to seeing you in the morning."* Then settle in for a possible battle of wills. He might get aggressive and bang the door, with the hope that you will cave in. Be strong, and silent. In my teaching experience, children carry on for 20 to 40 minutes, which can seem forever. Then they either give up or collapse out of exhaustion. Most parents find the problem is resolved within three nights. Not bad if you think of how many nights the problem has persisted!

- 2. The weaning method:** Find a compromise for the night if he awakens and wants to be near you. For example, he can sleep on the floor by your bed or by your door. **The condition is that he doesn't disturb you.** A blanket or duvet can be left for his use. If he disturbs you, go to the approach above.

Good luck, and good night. May you all sleep happily ever after!



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