

HELPING KIDS 5-10 YEARS GO TO SLEEP PEACEFULLY



It's a common scenario ...

Your child isn't keen on sleeping alone or in their own bed. In fact, they feel scared of bedtime as they associate it with worried feelings. They may feel an exaggerated pressure to fall asleep rather than being relaxed in their bed and drifting off.

As parents we eventually get tired ourselves and perhaps lie down with them. This helps at first but it's difficult to get away, sometimes they takes ages to fall asleep and they may even wake up later and the whole drama starts again. It is exhausting!

Some kids are just more sensitive than others, or perhaps they have had a rough time and need extra nurturing for a while. However getting into long term habits of sleeping with kids can be unhelpful for them. They may feel like a baby, and lack confidence to try more mature ways of managing things. It can also disrupt adults sleep patterns and relationships.

You can make some changes without rejecting children or shaming them. It can even be a positive experience for them. If they have some control, choices and they see progress. The key is to be firm and caring at the same time, and to expect some resistance – remain consistent.

If you want your child to sleep separately, do some pre-planning

Try to help your child name their own feelings, identify worries, and talk about problems day to day. You can model this for them "I was feeling pretty nervous at work, my hands were sweaty and I had to take some deep breaths and calm myself down – I realised I was nervous about doing a speech later that day"... kids love to hear these things and it helps them bring their own problems to light and talk about them.

Explore their night time worries during the day when they are feeling more confident. Really listen and show you understand.

Have a chat with your partner (if you have one), and work out what change you want to make. A good start is **no more getting into their bed or letting them get into yours**. Perhaps start this on a Friday night so you don't have to work the next day as it could be rather trying.

So if they are not going to be snuggling up next to you, what else can you offer?

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Ideas include:

- » Setting up a new bedtime routine with them, lasting 15 to 20 mins; sit on their bed until they are drowsy (but don't lie down).
- » Staying for 15 minutes of chat in a chair near their bed, then putting on their relaxation music and leaving.
- » Leaving the light on and checking on them every 5 (extending to 10) mins until they are asleep so they do not feel alone (do not go to them in between the ten minutes even if they cry or call out).
- » Buying a night light so they can read or listen to music until they fall asleep (no devices with screens).
- » Moving their bed right next to the door (even if it is impractical) so they feel closer to you and leaving a hallway light on. Most kids eventually get sick of that and move the bed back in their own time.

Sometimes **buying some items** to make the bedroom extra secure and comfy can help – like a new bed or bunks, fairy lights, cosy rugs and extra pillows or a touch sensitive lamp. Involve them in choosing and installing the new items so they feel more in control. Give them choices. A long rectangular body pillow is good because they can cuddle up to it like a human being. Large stuffed toys may also be appreciated, if they choose them.



Help them **make a list of things they can do** when they don't feel like going to sleep. (Music, planning their next birthday party, naming all the players in their favourite team, singing, rubbing their feet together, tensing then relaxing each body part, one by one).

When it is time to make a change

Explain the new rules and ask them how they feel about it – listen to their concerns rather than dismissing them. Explain that you have decided you will all sleep better and get into a healthy routine if you can all stay in your own beds. You might re-introduce past routines they liked, such as a hot bath, cuddle or storytime before bed, if this helps. Many kids love to sleep with a pet ... but that is the adult's decision.



Avoid shaming them or implying they are immature, cowardly or anything negative. They just prefer to sleep close to you – big deal. That is OK. You can understand and appreciate it – but still draw boundaries.

Whatever you choose – make sure it is do-able. If you really don't think you can sustain a major change like the ideas above you might make a gradual change. Set yourself up with a comfortable single bed mattress. Sleep on the floor by their bed on a mattress for the first 3 nights, then closer to the door, then in the hallway, then eventually in your bed! But do not chat to them or pat them, just being there is the benefit and that is gradually reduced.

If they get out of bed and come to you – send them back (be business-like) or walk them back, but no cuddles. Use the broken record technique: repeat “You need to hop back into bed now,” firmly but kindly. They will get sick of getting up if there is no pay off.

Provide a reward each week for effort (such as Lego or similar) and talk about the new skills they are learning. If they are still really struggling after 3 weeks you could introduce a rule that you will sleep on the floor in their room every Friday night, as long as they co-operate the rest of the week. That weekly boost may help them feel more secure.



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Aim for a balance of independence and closeness.

Once they have slept in their own bed for about 2 or 3 weeks reassure your child that this change doesn't mean they can NEVER come to you. When it comes to sleep, we want them to feel okay about coming to parents occasionally on a particularly anxious night or when they are really sick, yet comfortable sleeping alone on a regular basis.

Their anxiety and tears probably push your buttons too. As a parent try to have some confidence in their ability to self soothe. They do put on a performance for those they love most – but there are hidden reserves they can draw on. If you are in the house and moving around as they go to sleep they are unlikely to be genuinely scared.

Include them in relaxation exercises – Try watching a Three-minute Mindfulness Meditation on Youtube. It's very calming. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDfInqo0TQs>)



Two great story books

Written and illustrated by Emma Yarlett, Templar Books.

Many things frighten Orion, but there is one thing he is most afraid of: the dark. This is a fun bedtime story of how Orion faces his greatest fear while teaching us that bedtime doesn't have to be dreadful or scary after all. The dark, he realizes, can become your best friend, and some of the darkest places can be the most fun

Written by Rob Scotton and Annie Auerbach and illustrated by Loryn Brantz, HarperCollins.

Splat the Cat is allowed to hear three bedtime stories before bed. He particularly loves the ones about brave cats and their adventures. But when the lights go out, Splat can't sleep because he is scared of having bad dreams. He realizes that under his control, his nightmares have a funny way of turning into amazing adventures.

