



From Crib to Bed:

Transitioning a Young Child

There is conflicting advice about when a parent should have a young child begin sleeping in a bed rather than a crib. Generally, it is encouraged around 2 to 3 years of age. Often it occurs unexpectedly after a child has fallen out or climbed out of a crib, and even more commonly within a few weeks of mom learning she is expecting another child.

For safety reasons, it is strongly encouraged to continue having a child sleep in a crib until the child is at least 26 months of age if the child is NOT sleeping in the parent's room. If a child under age 26 months has fallen or climbed out of the crib, it is advisable to obtain a deeper crib, even though they are hard to find. Toddlers who wake at night and sleep in a bed (not a crib) can wander and have serious injuries.

Some transitions from crib to bed can proceed smoothly and actually be quite enjoyable; however, there has been a significant increase in the number of parents who have experienced problems. The most common complaint is that the child will not stay in bed. After the child is put to bed, the child comes out of the room repeatedly, or calls out repeatedly until a parent responds. Often the child is up later and later, is tired and crabby and parents become more and more frustrated. Bedtime becomes an unpleasant ordeal. In addition, parents frequently complain that the child won't take naps or wakes at night and comes into the parents' room. To get their child to stay in bed, some parents begin staying with the child until the child is asleep, either at bedtime or during a night waking. This can easily develop into a habit, and subsequently the toddler needs the parent to stay each and every bedtime.

To spare the parent from some of these problems, we suggest waiting to transition a child from crib to bed when:

The child is at least 26 months old, has an easy-going temperament and is currently sleeping well at night and for naps, obtaining an average of 13 hrs. or more sleep per day.

OR

The child is 2 ½ years or older, has had some sleep issues intermittently, but is currently sleeping very well at night and for naps, obtaining an average of 13 hrs. or more sleep per day.

OR

The child is 2 ¾ years or older and is currently sleeping well, obtaining an average of 12 ½ hours or more sleep per day.

In other words, the child needs to be sleeping well first. Transitioning to a bed typically makes any existing sleep problem worse – much worse.

Once the parent decides to transition the child to a bed, we would suggest having the child sleep on the mattress on the floor without a rail for about three weeks. Once the mattress is elevated on box springs and a frame, put a rail on any open side. The parent should stress to the child the importance of staying in bed after bedtime, and that the parent will return when it is time to get up (as opposed to a child going to the parent and checking to see if it is time to get up). Try to avoid suggesting to a child that “when it is light out, it's time to get up” lest you have a child who is up at the crack of dawn several months a year.

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Expecting Significant Difficulty?

If you are expecting difficulty during the transition of your child to a bed, predicting she will come out of the room numerous times after bedtime, or anticipating the worst possible scenario with many awakenings during the night with resultant sleep deprivation, here are some suggestions:

- Delay the process whenever possible until the child is nearly 3 years or older and is sleeping well.
- Consider saying to the child: “Guess what! I received a post card in the mail from the National Sleep Center. It says we are one of the best families in the world! And it says you are entitled to a trial in a bed.”
- Keep the crib in the room at least six weeks, especially if your child is 30 months or younger.
- Set up a mattress on the floor. Tell your child that there are other parts to the bed that lift it off the floor, that have not come yet. They have been ordered. For now, the child is to sleep on the mattress on the floor (for safety reasons). After the child has slept well for two to four weeks, the box springs and frame could be added.
- Avoid remarks such as “If you don’t stay in bed, you’ll be back in the crib”. Instead, try “Every night we will see how well you do in your new bed. Each night that you stay quietly in bed and sleep well, I will put a mark on the post card that we send back to the National Sleep Center.” Prizes or rewards probably will not be necessary.
- One parent should stay very close to the child’s room (not in view of the child) after bedtime, for several nights. This will allow the parent to hear if the child is getting out of bed and playing in the room. Also, if the child comes out of the room the parent will know immediately. When a child sees the parent is so close to his room, he is more likely to stay in bed. If the child has stayed in bed and is sleeping well for 7 to 10 nights, it is usually no longer necessary for the parent to sit near the child’s room after bedtime.

If for three consecutive nights your child is coming out of the room numerous times at bedtime or during the night, and reminders to stay quietly in bed are not working, the trial is most likely over. If your child asks about getting a mark on the post card, just say “Not today. I’m sure you’ll do better tonight.”

If you have determined the trial is over, consider telling your child the other parts to the new bed have still not arrived, and he must return to the crib for “a few nights” until the parts come in. Go back to the crib for 6-12 weeks and try the bed again. You could also just say the trial is over, the crib must be used, and he will get another post card in the mail when it is time to try the bed again.

If your child has done poorly with the transition to a bed and you do not wish to go back to using a crib, or your child has had several unsuccessful trials with the bed, come in to discuss possible options.