

Reclaim your bedroom: How to get your kids to sleep in their bed

Has your bed been taken over by small children? Are you exhausted?

It's time to reclaim your bedroom and get your children into their beds once and for all.

While you may feel like you're the only parent struggling when it comes to bedtime, you aren't alone, according to Angela Mattke, M.D. in Community Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine at Mayo Clinic.

"This is a common thing that happens with kids, and there are things [parents] can do to help them, but the approach they decide to use has to be what's going to fit with their family and something they can live with and be consistent with," she said.

Mattke said the reasons kids end up in bed with mom and dad differ. Children may wake up during the night and want to see what mom and dad are up to, or they might be anxious because their parents were in the room when they fell asleep and now they aren't. Regardless of the reason, it's important to implement a strategy that breaks the child's association of sleep with parents.

Parents should strive to develop a bedtime routine for their children, according to Jean Moorjani a paediatrician at Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children said.

"We recommend that children need routine and structure," Moorjani said. "A calm bedtime routine, so they know what to expect every night. Whether that's turning off any kind of screens, films and video games, and reading on their own or with a family member, bath-time, brushing their teeth."

Here are some guidelines on getting a child to sleep in their own bed:

Make a plan during the day, and stick with it at night

Once you decide to reclaim your bedroom, formulate a plan and be ready to stick with it, even if you're tired.

"I recommend thinking about it before the middle of the night when you're exhausted and have little ability to withstand more crying," Mattke said. "Talk about what will fit for you guys and a plan you can live with, and be consistent. Once you implement it, you don't go back once they are out of bed they are out. You don't say 'oh, for five minutes,' or 'they had a bad day.'"

Mattke said there are typically two groups of children: the ones who start out in their bed and come to their parents in the middle of the night and those who are sleeping with their parents all the time.

For those who start out in their bed:

As soon as your child comes into your room, take their hand and walk them back to their bedroom, kiss them and walk back to your bed, Moorjani said. And regardless of how tired you are, be prepared to do this as many times and necessary.

"We call it the '100 walks,'" Moorjani said. "You tuck your child in and walk out, and your child walks out too. You walk them back and tuck them in, and it can happen many times but if you maintain no reaction the child will realize, 'well Mum isn't here to play with me.'"

She said the best advice for parents to remain neutral and show no emotion when they walk the child back. That means even if you're exhausted you keep your cool and don't get angry, Mattke said.

"Have as little positive or negative interactions with them, because either they will feed off of it because they are looking for a response from you and they need consistent this is what we do," Mattke said.

She notes that it's best to talk through the new plan with your child during the day, so they know what to expect, and you can mentally prepare to implement the plan.

Parents can use sticker charts and set goals, with low expectations at first, so the child can succeed early on, Moorjani said.

"Kids can see [the sticker charts] and see the good things they are doing, so it's very concrete," Moorjani said. "If you sleep through one night in your bed-- you get a star. Whatever the family wants to work out for the reward system where the child gets that positive reinforcement."

It may take a few nights or even a few months, but soon the child will understand that going into their parent's room results in a swift walk back to their room and not a night in their parent's bed.

"Eventually the new rules will stick, and they will stay in their bed," she said. "Give them the reassurance that if they need something, if they are sick they

can call out - but if they are fine mom and dad will put them back, kiss them and walk out."

The phase out method:

For children who have been sleeping in their parent's bed, the phase out method may help them feel safe in their bedrooms.

It works like this: For the first few nights, the parent will put the child in their bed and sleep on the floor next to the child. The parent will gradually decrease their presence in their child's room, going from sleeping on the floor, to sitting in a chair until they fall asleep, and ultimately standing by the door until the child is sleepy and then closing the door.

"This will build confidence in ability to fall asleep on their own, and tell the child 'I will check on you once you are sleeping,' and that can build confidence that Mum and Dad will check on me," she said.

Mattke said some parents start the process in their bedroom, and place the child on the floor next to the bed and slowly move them to their room.

During this process, the parents' bedroom should be off limits, she said.

"It shouldn't be parent's bed for nap-time and their bedroom for bedtime, it should be this is your bed where you sleep," she said.

The bedtime pass system:

For older children who may be in preschool or primary school, the bedtime pass system may work, according to Moorjani.

Each night, the parents give their child one pass to leave their room. Whether that's for a drink of water, a hug or to tell their parents something before they go to sleep, they only get one chance to leave their bedroom each night, Moorjani said, adding that studies have shown it works.

"It seems so simple, but it's a concrete way for kids to understand the rules and limits," she said. "'OK its bedtime and I need to go to sleep,' but they have some control that they know 'I can come out one more time.'"

Regardless of what you are dealing with, being consistent will pay off. At some point, the child will learn that their room is where they have to sleep.