

Parenting Puzzles (February 2006)

Q: My 4-year-old son has recently begun having trouble sleeping through the night. He has always been a terrific sleeper, but lately he has been getting up in the middle of the night and coming into our bed. I am so tired, I often just let him stay with us until morning. Is this OK, or should I insist that he go back to his own bed?

A: Most children wake at some point during the night. Although many fall back to sleep without fully waking, some children go through phases when they have difficulty getting themselves back to sleep. The first step in figuring out how to handle your son's new sleep pattern is to ask why the behavior is happening.

- Is he coming into your room for comfort because something is frightening him? Calm reassurance, and even some bedtime rituals designed to reduce fears (e.g., checking under the bed for monsters) can go a long way in helping children regain a sense of security.
- Has there been a change in the environment or schedule (e.g., move to a new home, starting school)? If you think this is the trigger, the sleep disruption is likely time limited and will resolve with some support once the stresses have decreased.

The decision to allow your child to sleep with you versus bringing him back to his room is really a personal decision. Most children feel a great sense of accomplishment when they are able to master the skill of sleeping through the night in their own bed, and for that reason it is a good idea to set that as a goal. However, the timeframe in which you work toward that goal is really a matter of personal preference.

Q: My 7 year old daughter is very shy and clingy. When she goes to friends' birthday parties, she insists that I stay with her throughout the party, even though she knows most of the other children very well. She always seems to have a good time, but I'm wondering if she's getting to be too old for this type of behavior. Shouldn't she be able to separate from me more easily by now? Should I insist that she stay at the party without me?

A: Some degree of separation anxiety is normal, even in the early elementary school years. For many children, anxiety will increase in new situations or environments. If your daughter's need to keep you nearby is **not** interfering with her ability to socialize and have a good time, then there's no real need to worry. You may be able to negotiate some compromise with her eventually; for example, agreeing to stay with her for the first 20 minutes, leave for a short while and then return before the end of the party. Separation anxiety that interferes with a child's functioning (e.g., school attendance, peer relationships, sleep) and does not subside over time may require professional attention.