

# Kids create 'mattress madness' for parents



*Jo Ann  
Volk Lederman*

**FAMILY MATTERS**

Dear Jo Ann,

*Our children ages 5 and 7 fall asleep in our bed. We carry them back to their beds, but awaken when they creep back into our bed. It hasn't left much space for intimacy.*

Leslie G.

Dear Leslie,

When seals give birth, their pups have three weeks to nurse and be provided sufficient skills to independently hunt and survive in freezing waters. Elephants, get far more time. They nurse for two years, keeping their babies close, and may travel together as a herd for a lifetime. In Japan, from the moment the umbilical cord is severed, the baby is brought back into the family society, commonly to sleep in the parental bed. I haven't figured out when they produce siblings.

Here, the conventional wisdom is that after birth, mother and baby bond through the nursing period, frequently bringing the father into the picture with close physical contact through play, changing and feeding. Problems arise when the couple devotes all waking time to needs of their children and neglect the primacy of their own relationship. Parents need and deserve time to nurture their attachment to each other, and to foster their emotional and physical intimacy. Children feel safer when their parents function as a team and are closely bonded.

It is inevitable to want to spend lots of time with these adorable, cherished children. It takes on a greater significance when parents work, and there are few waking hours to be close. Your letter suggests that you have let this pattern continue longer than you might have wished, and that you may be experiencing some of the following typical consequences of having your child in bed:

- Diminishment of marital intimacy
- Diminished sleep
- Failure of children to develop self-soothing techniques
- Children depend on you for comfort more than developing their own skills
- Children do not self-govern their night time rituals.

You will need more than a shoe-horn to unearth your children and it may be challenging for a night or two. Here's the plan, and you and your husband have to agree because you will both be in on it together. If the children perceive ambivalence on the part of one or both of you, they will do their best to undo your plan rather than forsake what has been a comfort to them. They may not make this change to nighttime independence easily, but these guidelines have worked with reliability for many of the parents I treat.

Inform your child/children of an impending change, and what you expect of them and why.

Reframe it in the most positive words and concepts. If your child demonstrates fear or concern, answer his/her questions.

Set up nighttime rituals to help your children feel grown up and rewarded by their own success.

For the first few nights, expect attempts to win their way back into your bed.

I instruct parents to bring the child/children back to bed reliably.

Get the idea across that you will not be manipulated.

Reassure your children that they will be safe.

Give them a flashlight to turn on at fragile moments.

Let them know that you are teaching them how to have sleepovers with their grandparents or friends. Are there other rewards you can think of?

Give them comforting music, reading, glass of water or nightlight. I gave Liz, Michael and John miners' lights and told them they could stay up and read until they needed to sleep, but could not leave their room. They appreciated gaining trust and independence, and were asleep in minutes. They felt empowered by their own control over bedtime. Of course, Sunday morning cuddles in our bed were a must.

Every family has its particular system of meaningful rewards to encourage behavioral change. See what works best for you. If you need more ideas and suggestions, I will be happy to help. This is a recipe for a win/win. Good luck!

*Jo Ann Volk Lederman is executive director of South Miami Psychology Associates. In private clinical practice for 25 years, she specializes in marriage and family therapy, couples therapy, infertility issues, behavioral medicine and business consulting. To contact Volk Lederman, call 305-666-8833, send mail to 7800 Red Road, Suite 205A, Miami 33143; or address email to*