



## Gradually Removing Parental Presence

This handout describes several strategies to encourage children ages 2 and older to fall asleep independently (i.e., in their own bed without a parent in the room). Many children around the world sleep in the same room or bed as a parent or a brother or sister. While sharing a bed is unsafe for infants under the age of 1, the evidence does not suggest that it is bad for children to sleep in the same room or bed as a parent. Thus, the decision about where a child should sleep is a personal family decision. It is OK for children to sleep with their parents if this is working for everyone in the family, and it is also OK for parents to want a child to sleep in his or her own bed.

Whatever you decide, it often works best if your child falls asleep in the same place and under the same conditions that he or she will experience in the middle of the night. This includes both conditions in the environment (e.g., lights and sound) and whether or not a parent is present. For example, if your child falls asleep with the hall light on, he or she will have an easier time returning to sleep if the hall light is still on when he or she wakes up to go to the bathroom. Similarly, if a parent is in the room when a child falls asleep, the child is more likely to call for a parent if he or she wakes in the middle of the night and notices the parent is not there.

If you would like to try teaching your child to fall asleep independently, try the instructions below. These suggestions work best when children are falling asleep fairly quickly after bedtime most nights (e.g., in less than 30 minutes). If your child takes longer than 30 minutes to fall asleep most nights, talk to your child's provider about using a different strategy.

### Gradually Removing Parental Presence: Sample Steps

- Parent lays down with child in another location (e.g., parent's bed)
- Parent lays down with child in child's bed
- Parent sits in chair next to child's bed, leaning over to pat or physically comfort child
- Parent gradually decreases the amount of physical contact
- Parent sits next to child's bed, but without touching child
- Parent sits halfway between the child's bed and the bedroom door
- Parent sits next to the bedroom door inside the child's room
- Parent sits outside the bedroom door in the child's view
- Parent sits outside the bedroom door outside the child's view



- Parent stays in the next room but comes often to check on child (e.g., stands at door and gives thumbs up or quietly praises child)
- Parent gradually checks less often
- Parent stays in next room and only checks on child once or twice

### Instructions

**Plan the program.** Look at the steps above and find the step that matches your current situation (e.g., child sleeping in parent's bed with parent).

**Right now our family is at this step:** \_\_\_\_\_

Now choose a step below that you think your child is ready to try. For most children, this will be the next step on the list (after the step you listed above), but it could be a few steps lower. Try and choose a step that your child can do successfully. With an older child, you may want to allow him or her to help you decide where to start.

**We will start at this step at bedtime:** \_\_\_\_\_

If your child wakes during the night, decide how you want to respond. One choice is to return to the same step you used at bedtime (e.g., parent sits next to bed). This approach tends to work the most quickly, but it is also hard for parents who are tired themselves. You can also use this program at bedtime only. That is, if your child wakes during the night you can return to whatever step allows everyone to get the most sleep (e.g., allowing your child to sleep in your bed).

**We will use this step if my child wakes during the night:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Explain the program to your child.** Using positive words (i.e., without criticizing or embarrassing your child), explain that the family is going to work together on this program to sleep better as a family. Show your child the steps and tell him or her when the program will start. Acknowledge that this may be hard for him or her, but that you will be there to help.

**Start using the program.** When you put your child to bed, follow the step you have selected (e.g., parent sits next to bed). Stay there each night until he or she is asleep. After three good nights in a row (e.g., your child falls asleep in less than 30 minutes without a lot of fussing), celebrate his or her success with praise or a reward and move to the next step. You do not have to use the steps that are listed in this handout. You can add an extra step or skip a step. The important thing is that you are slowly having less and less contact with your child at bedtime.



**Continue to use the program until your child is falling asleep on his or her own at bedtime.** At this point, you will probably start to see improvements in the middle of the night. Your child may stop calling to you or coming to your bed during the night. If your child continues to need you in the middle of the night, review the recommendations in the Troubleshooting section at the end of this handout.

### **Tips to Help Your Child with This Program**

- **Add a reward program.** Some children respond well to a reward system. Your child can earn a small prize or an extra privilege each morning if he or she stayed in bed without fussing the night before. If there is a night when a child is particularly upset or anxious, the child can request that the parent return to a previous step (e.g., lay down with the child in bed). The child would not earn a reward for that night.
- **Use the "excuse me" drill.** At any step, make brief excuses to leave the room for a short period. For example, you may tell your child you are checking on his or her sister or getting a drink of water and will be right back. At first, stay away for less than one minute. Try and return when your child is waiting quietly in bed instead of waiting until he or she calls for you. Praise your child for being brave and staying in bed alone. The next night, stay away for a little longer. If by chance your child falls asleep while you are gone, give him or her a lot of praise the next day: "I came back to check, and you were asleep! I am so excited that you fell asleep by yourself!" This exercise gives your child practice being alone at bedtime.

### **Troubleshooting**

- **Your child takes a long time to fall asleep.** When starting the program or going to a new step, it may take your child longer to fall asleep as he or she adjusts to this change. However, after a few days, your child should start falling asleep more quickly. If this does not happen, talk to a provider about other strategies to try.
- **Your child seems extremely afraid or anxious at bedtime.** If your child seems very worried or afraid at bedtime, talk to a provider about teaching him or her strategies to help manage these emotions.
- **Your child falls asleep independently but still wakes up in the middle of the night wanting you.** If your child falls asleep alone at bedtime but continues to want a parent in the middle of the night, go to your child briefly but then leave the room again while he or she is still awake. Also, consider whether there is something different about the environment in the middle of the night compared to bedtime.
- **Your child sneaks into your bed during the night.** If you are using this program at bedtime only, this may not be a problem. However, if you have instructed your child to stay in bed all night, you can try putting a bell or a small alarm on your door so that you will wake if your child enters your room at night. You can also add a reward program so that your child earns a prize if he or she stays in his or her own bed all night.



- **Your child throws a tantrum or refuses to stay in bed.** Try a reward system. You can also tell your child that if he or she fusses or gets out of bed, you will leave the room. Only use this strategy if you feel you can leave your child alone in his or her room safely (e.g., your child will not try to hurt himself or herself or destroy toys). When you leave the room, stand by the door to monitor for safety. When your child calms down and returns to bed, go back into the room.
- **Your child never earns the bedtime reward.** Try changing the reward so that it is something your child really wants to earn. For example, some families will have a special TV show or video game that the child can only watch/play if he or she did well at bedtime the night before. You can also try changing the program so that your child does not have the choice of asking the parent to return to a previous step (i.e., the child does not get to choose where the parent sits). Try the “excuse me” drill described above. If your child still does not respond to the program, talk with a provider about trying a different strategy.

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