



FAMILY BED

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I am thinking about scared kids and scared parents. Kids who have night terrors and parents who take kids into their own adult beds to comfort them. Perhaps because they remember what it was like to be a scared kid themselves. Perhaps to assuage a sense of parental helplessness.

There are frightening things happening in the world. Capture of children at the southern U.S. border and forced separation. Starvation and neglect. Child trafficking. And in our own families – conflict between parents. Confusion on what to do about a child's symptoms.

It is difficult to hold the boundary as an adult. To maintain the sanctity of the place we lay our heads down to rest. We are so tired at the end of the day. The child is so persistent. So we give in.

Some of my clients believe in the “family bed” concept and employ it with their young children. Working as I do as a therapist sensitive to the importance of secure attachment as a springboard to assist children as they grow to form adult relationships outside the family, I can appreciate and understand this.

And...when does it stop? When does the inner demand of a child for safety bump up against the growing need for ego development, individuation and independence?

I've met with kids as old as eight or nine and up through 12 years old still sleeping with one adult or both, often in situations of parental discord.

At what age should a child sleep in their own bed? And by the way, isn't this a “first world” question? Kids living in small spaces where the adults in the family can't afford to provide separate bedrooms - what to do?

My answer is that this is a family by family decision. I do ask several questions to parents about the often unlocked door that leads to the family bed. The first among them, “How is this affecting your sex life?” As your child grows older, what's it like for him or her to be in your energy field while sleeping, let alone bumping up against your body? And a harder one for some parents - Does the family bed contribute to any avoidance in confronting issues with your own primary adult relationship? As we all know, kids grow up and avoidance strategies do not work forever.

Are you allowing your child to substitute for an intimate adult relationship? At what cost is this to you and what price does or will your child pay?

So I say to courageous parents: do your own therapeutic work to get through any issues you haven't faced. This will be the greatest gift you can give your child. Consider the value of softly closing the door on the chapter of the “family bed” so you and your child can sleep, over the long haul, a bit more soundly.