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point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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The Benefits of Co-Sleeping

by Molly Brannigan

Many American parents feel called to sleep with their little ones, but feel unsure about caring for their babies and children differently than they were cared for themselves. Most Americans approaching parenthood today slept independently from the beginning of their lives and anticipate a similar experience for their own babies. But after they actually meet their babies, many parents feel reluctant to be apart from them at night. More parents are keeping their children with them at night, and are finding that sleeping together is both enriching and satisfying.

It is probable that co-sleeping has always been fairly common in the United States, but only in the last few years are co-sleeping parents publicly discussing their sleeping practices. The more scientists look at co-sleeping, the more developmental and health benefits they find for children and adults. The more parents experiment with co-sleeping, the more they discover the many ways co-sleeping can deepen and enrich their relationships with their children. Some also discover that it makes parenting, during day and night, easier.

Co-Sleeping is Good for Building Relationships

Co-sleeping with babies can deepen bonds between parents and children because it increases the amount of time they spend touching. Touch releases the hormones that activate the neuro-physiological processes that are the foundation of human social relationships. The two most important of these hormones are oxytocin and prolactin. Parents may have read about these hormones only in the context of breastfeeding, without hearing that they are also created in significant quantity when babies and parents are in close physical proximity, and especially when they are touching. This information may be particularly meaningful to adoptive parents for whom breastfeeding is not an option.

In both adults and children, oxytocin is responsible for the feelings of safety, trust and generosity, as well as the impulse to create social interactions. During the early period of brain development, it is involved in helping the brain learn to decode non-verbal social information. Prolactin is responsible for feelings of nurturance and caretaking, and increases our understanding of babies' non-verbal cues. It also creates feelings of relaxation and sleepiness in both babies and adults (especially welcome at bedtime).

Co-sleeping is Good for Babies and Children

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that tells us that the more time that babies spend touching their parents, the healthier they are. Because co-sleeping increases the number of hours that babies spend in close proximity to their parents, it can contribute to their good health. Babies in close physical proximity to trusted adults have stronger and more regular heartbeats, more regular breathing patterns, more oxygen in their blood, and fewer stress hormones in their bodies. As a result, they grow faster, cry less, and spend more time in the quiet alert state (the state most conducive to learning). Babies sleeping in close proximity to their parents are less likely to die of SIDS, which is why the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all babies under six months sleep in their parents' room (though the AAP recommends the use of a crib).

Research shows that children who sleep with their parents cry less, and have fewer behavior problems. Additionally, they are less likely to experience sleep problems like night terrors and extreme difficulty falling asleep. When co-sleeping babies and children night-wake, parents are able to resettle them to sleep more quickly than they can solitary sleeping babies. This is because they are less aroused by the time parents reach them, and because relaxing hormones associated with close physical proximity to parents help them return to sleep more easily. They are less likely to cry on the way to sleep and less likely to cry upon waking.

The effects of increased calming hormones associated with co-sleeping can be particularly helpful in parenting babies and children who are fussy, very energetic, easily over-stimulated, or sensitive. For children who have difficulty separating from their parents, co-sleeping can significantly reduce the number of separations to be endured.

Children exposed to a lot of oxytocin early in life—those who were touched often and spend a lot of time in close physical proximity to their parents—have been shown to be more independent, more exploratory, less anxious in unfamiliar environments and better able to manage stress in later childhood and adulthood. Co-sleeping is one way to ensure that children are exposed to plenty of oxytocin.

Co-sleeping is Good for Parents

Many parents worry that they will not as sleep as well if they sleep with their babies. Parents of small babies often worry that they will injure their babies while they sleep; usually this fear recedes as they develop confidence in their parenting abilities and the robustness of their babies. As this happens, parents begin to sleep longer and better. Recent studies show that parents who sleep with their babies get more sleep, in particular more rest-inducing REM sleep, than parents who sleep separately from their babies.

Many parents worry less about their babies when they are close, and feel more deeply connected to them. Parents also get the benefits of regular doses of oxytocin and prolactin as a result of closeness to their children—increasing both their feelings of well-being and their ability to withstand stress. Working parents who spend a large part of their daytime hours away from their children often use co-sleeping as a way of staying as connected as possible during the hours they are with their children.

Parents may find that co-sleeping means that they have to more creative when it comes to making time for sex. Some couples find another place in the house to be intimate while baby is sleeping in the family bed. Others take advantage of naptimes when babies may be sleeping in a crib. Some parents move their sleeping baby into a crib for an hour or two so that they can get some time together. Every couple will find their own solution.

Transitioning Adopted Children to Co-sleeping

Some babies cared for in institutions become accustomed to sleeping alone in a crib (even if the crib is in a room with many other cribs) or have not had a lot of experience of touch at the time of their adoption. Some of these babies may find the amount of sensory stimulation inherent to co-sleeping overwhelming at first, and may need a slow and respectful transition to co-sleeping. You can start with a crib right next to your bed, and gradually introduce as much snuggling time as your baby finds pleasurable, allowing her to return to her crib if she gets overwhelmed by the sensations of sustained close physical proximity. Over time, most babies will be able to enjoy co-sleeping as much as their parents. It is possible that babies who require a slower introduction to co-sleeping will benefit most from what it has to offer. This may also be true for their parents.

Transitioning Away from Co-sleeping

Eventually, all families become ready to begin sleeping separately. The right time will be different for every child and every family. Sometimes this transition goes quickly, sometimes slowly. Sometimes children go right from the parents' bed directly into their own bed in their own room. Sometimes the route is more circuitous, with a stop in a separate bed in the parents' room or in a sibling's bed. There are many paths families can travel when moving to separate sleep. Parents who are alert to the needs of their children, as well as their own needs, and who are able stay flexible will find the solution that works best for their family. Your heart will be your best guide in finding your path.

Molly Brannigan has three children, ages seven, five and two. She has been leading workshops for parents since 2002. She can hardly remember sleeping without children!

Safest Co-Sleeping

Babies and children should only co-sleep with non-smoking adults.

Babies should always start sleep on their backs (if they can roll over on their own, it is not necessary to roll them back).

Babies and children should only co-sleep on mattresses or futons. It is not possible to safely co-sleep on a sofa or waterbed.

Babies and children should only co-sleep on a firm mattress, and there should be less than a two-finger-width gap between the mattress and headboard or wall.

Arrange blankets so that they cannot cover the baby or child's face. Some parents put very young co-sleeping babies on top of the blankets. Keep babies away from pillows.

Babies and children co-sleeping with a sibling (other than a twin) should be separated from the sibling by an adult body.

Co-sleeping adults must be sober. Co-sleeping is not safe if you have been drinking, taking drugs, or have taken medication that could interfere with your rousability (such as Nyquil).

Babies and young children should not sleep alone in adult beds.