

Helping Your Child Sleep Alone or Away from Home

Many anxious children and teens feel a sense of security by sleeping close to their parents. In particular, children and teens with separation anxiety may plead, beg, or have a tantrum in order to sleep in your bed. This can cause problems, not only for your child, but also for you. When anxious children and teens sleep in their parents' bed, they are not facing their fears, and will continue to be afraid of sleeping alone. They do not learn how to calm themselves down, and do not see that everything will be okay. Co-sleeping makes it difficult for parents to get a good night's sleep or find alone time with a spouse or partner. Even though most parents know it is not appropriate for their child to be afraid of sleeping alone, they are unsure of how to change this behavior.

Getting Your Child To Sleep Alone: HOW TO DO IT!

Step 1: Preparing your child

Before starting any new plan in your home, it is important that your child understand what is going to happen and why. For younger children, you might want to read books with them about co-sleeping, and explain that wanting to sleep in mom and/or dad's bed is another way that anxiety is being a bully (for more information on teaching your child about anxiety, see [How to Talk to Your Child about Anxiety](#)).

For teens, explain that sleeping alone is a normal part of growing up, and although it sounds scary, it is important to face this fear gradually.

Step 2: Make your child's bedroom fun!

It is important to make this new change as easy as possible for your child. Get your child involved in making his or her bedroom more appealing. Be creative, and encourage your child to decorate his or her room with enjoyable and fun things (e.g., pictures, posters, a nightlight, wind chimes, and/or a bedspread in a favorite color!). Focusing your child's attention on the positives will reduce anxiety when he or she first starts sleeping alone.

You can also try to focus your child's attention on the benefits of sleeping in his or her own bedroom, including:

- For younger children, being a "big boy" or a "big girl", and sleeping alone.
- Getting to sleep in a bedroom that is all his or her own! If your child shares the room with a sibling, make sure each child has a personal space that they can decorate.
- Older children and teens may look forward to future sleepovers at a friend's house, or camping trips with the school.

Step 3: Establish a bedtime routine

As a parent, you probably already have a bedtime routine with your child, which might involve reading a story and goodnight kisses. This entire routine should take place in your child's bedroom. Even if your child is not ready to sleep alone right away, it will be easier if your child is used to getting ready for bed in his or her own bedroom, rather than in your bedroom. For more information on bedtime routines, see [Healthy Habits in the Home](#)

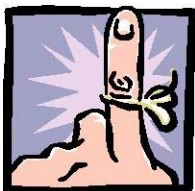
Step 4: Gradually facing fears

It may be unrealistic to expect your child to be able to sleep alone immediately. Instead, you can make a fear ladder with your child, with the goal being to “sleep in my own bed for the entire night”.

When asking your child to gradually face his or her fears, it is important to progress at your child’s pace. Every child and teen is different, and will be able to start on a different step. Some suggestions for a first step include:

- Having your child sleep on a cot in your bedroom.
- Having your child sleep on a cot near the door of your bedroom or on the floor in sleeping bag.
- Having your child sleep on a cot just outside your bedroom (with the door open).
- Having your child sleep in his or her bedroom, with you staying in a chair in the room until he or she falls asleep (do not lie down with child in his or her room).
- Having your child sleep in his or her bedroom, with a nightlight, with you staying in the room for 10 minutes.

For more information on making a fear ladder, see [Helping your Child to Face Fears: Exposure.](#)



Helpful Hint: Easing the transition

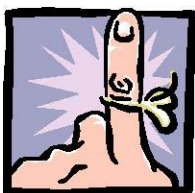
For some children and teens, gradually starting to sleep alone can be very scary, so you might need to include some extra steps in your child’s fear ladder, such as:

- Agreeing to check on your child once or twice during the night (or more frequently, if needed, with a plan to reduce checking over time).
- Giving your child a baby monitor or walkie-talkie to use when sleeping in bed alone.

Anything your child feels he or she can do to gradually stop sleeping in your bed is a step in the right direction!

Step 5: Praise, praise, praise!

No matter what fear your child is facing, it is difficult. Therefore, it is important to give your child lots of praise and reward! Every time your child is able to move up his or her fear ladder, be sure to praise this success!



Helpful Hints:

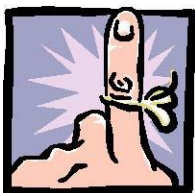
- Make a poster board with the days of the week, and put a gold star or a sticker for every night your child is able to accomplish his or her goal on the fear ladder! Display it somewhere in the house so everyone in the family can see how well your child is doing! Make sure to **never** take a star or sticker away for bad behavior. You want these rewards to be a motivator for your child, not a punishment.
- Some children will complain of nightmares. Your child may come to you for comfort in the middle of the night. For more information on how to deal with nightmares, see [Helping Your Child Cope with Nightmares.](#)

Helping Your Child Sleep Away from Home

Many children and teens with separation anxiety are afraid to sleep away from home. They may be afraid to go to camp, have a sleepover at a friend's house, or even stay with a grandparent. Fortunately, you can help your child manage his or her fear of sleeping away from home in the same way that you manage sleeping alone at home: by gradually facing fears.

Step 1: Explain the plan

Some children and teens might want to be able to sleep away from home, but are too worried or anxious to try it. If this is the case with your child, explain that the best way to deal with this fear is to take small steps. For children who do not want to sleep away from home, explain that anxiety is bullying him or her, and that together you will start fighting back.



Helping hint: Anxiety is normal!

Tell your child it is normal to be anxious or worried when you first sleep over at someone else's house. Everyone is a little afraid the first time, but that doesn't mean something bad will happen. Ask your child how he or she felt the first time a new activity was tried, like riding a bike or learning how to swim. It is always scary the first time, but it gets easier after awhile. Also, staying over at someone else's house can be fun! Talk to your child about the fun activities or games he or she can do while staying somewhere new.

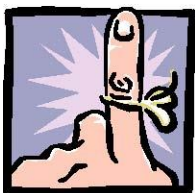
Step 2: Make a Fear Ladder

When you are planning to manage anxiety about being away from home, it is important to have a goal for your child, such as staying over at grandma's house, sleeping over at a friend's house, or inviting a friend to stay overnight. Whatever the goal, you can work with your child to make a **fear ladder**, with steps that move towards that goal. (see [Helping Your Child Face Fears - Exposure](#) for more information).

For example, if your child's goal is to go to a sleepover at a friend's house, some of the steps on the fear ladder might be:

- Have a friend come over and spend the day at your house.
- Have a friend sleep over at your house.
- Have two friends sleep over at your house.
- Go to friend's house to play with mom in the other room.
- Go to friend's house to play without mom there for an hour.
- Go to friend's house to play without mom there (mom calls once).
- Stay over night at a friend's house, calling mom once, if feeling anxious.
- Stay over night at a friend's house, without calling mom.

Make sure to go at your child's pace, and always **reward and praise** your child for every attempt they make at moving another step on their fear ladder.

**Helpful Hint: Listen and Problem Solve**

Your child may have lots of worries, such as “what if something bad happens while I’m gone?” or “what if I have a panic attack?” First, listen to your child’s worries without judging or saying they aren’t real or true. Remember, these fears are very real to your child. Next, help your child problem-solve and plan. For example, if your child is worried about having a panic attack, ask: “well, what could you do if that did happen? Could you go to the bathroom and practice your calm breathing? Could you call me? Could you tell your friend’s mom and maybe talk to her for a little bit? Let’s come up with a plan together.” Have your child write out the plan, and take it to the sleepover in a secret pocket. This can be reassuring, and sleeping away from home will feel less scary.