



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Is Co-Sleeping a Good Thing (The “Family Bed”)

The Lucy Daniels Center does not recommend family beds because we do not believe that this arrangement supports young children's developmental needs.

Changing needs for comfort: Many parents are drawn to a family bed because they know that their physical presence during the night helps their children feel close to and comforted by them. However, we believe that the children's needs for intimacy and comfort change they grow. During infancy, parents provide intimacy and comfort almost exclusively through the senses: touches, smells and sounds. We call this way of providing love the "core comforting relationship." A shift begins by the end of the first year of life. At that point, words and facial and bodily gestures are an important vehicle for the emotional interchange between child and parent. We call this a "verbally based comforting relationship."

The shift from a core to a verbally based comforting relationship occurs over time. This transition is important because it enables children to carry within themselves the profound level of safety and security originally provided by the core comforting relationship. If, in order to feel secure, children continue to require the presence of their parents, they may feel excessively dependent and insecure when on their own. Therefore, Lucy Daniels Center educators and mental health clinicians emphasize the importance of handing over the baton — of children taking the core comforting relationship that first exists between themselves and their parent, and making it exist within themselves. We call the process by which this change occurs "internalization." Older children achieve stable self-confidence when internalization of the core

comforting relationship has occurred. Parental hugs and kisses become little boosters for what children feel inside, rather than being necessary for a feeling of security.

Nurturing the ability to tolerate separation: Children's ability to master separation depends upon their successful internalization of parental comfort. This skill involves both a behavioral ability to be physically alone, as well as an internal capacity to feel comfortable, confident and fully vital when physically alone. Some children are not able to be physically alone because they do not have an internal capacity to be alone; others can manage the behavioral separation but are shackled with painful feelings and a diminishment of vitality.

Children confront the major separation of ordinary daily life at bedtime. Bedtime offers children the opportunity to master the painful feeling of aloneness through progressing along the path of internalizing of the comforting parent. Children are shepherded toward strengthening their own resources by bedtime rituals, check-ins, reassurances and similar limited comforts.

The basis of one of our concerns about the family bed is that such an arrangement has the risk of keeping children excessively dependent upon the core comforting relationship, upon others for their basic sense of safety in the world. It is much better if this sense of safety resides and abides inside children themselves.

Accepting the parental relationship: We have a second concern about the family bed. It is important that children understand and accept the reality that their parents have a relationship that has other dimensions in addition to their mutual parenting. Up through age 3, children believe that parents exist for only one reason: to parent them. This is a healthy, inevitable, self-orientation of early childhood. Around age 3, children develop the ability to understand that their parents have other interests. For example, a 2-year-old child can understand that his or her mother goes to work, but not that she might work in part because she enjoys being productive or creative. The child would only comprehend that she goes to work in order to make money and to take care of him or her.

One of the most emotionally important realizations of 3-year-old children is that their parents are also husband and wife in the sense that they have a relationship beyond their relationship as Mommy and Daddy. Children generally understand, perhaps even without having to be taught, that this special relationship includes a physical relationship. When parents have their own private bedroom, children usually understand that there is some kind of special relationship or activity occurring there, although they would not necessarily understand any details.

It is very important that children in the early childhood years recognize, accept and value this relationship between parents so that they can use such an understanding of the marital relationship as models for their own life path. However, children tend to resist accepting their parents' independent relationship. Children want to be the one and only. Ideally, children come to feel that they are the center of their parents' lives, but that their parents have other extremely important centers, including their spouse or partner. Children who don't accept their parent's relationship may remain excessively self-centered and less able to understand that people have motivations and needs that don't concern them. They are less able to chart within themselves a path toward a healthy, adult, balanced life. Unfortunately, the use of the parental bed supports the tendencies within the child to believe that the parents exist only for them. Separate beds force the child to face a hard truth, to relinquish a sense of being at the center of the universe. The pain involved in accepting this is in fact one reason that some children resist sleeping alone.

There is a case to be made for the use of a family bed. However, we do not believe that it is a sufficient case, or in the child's fullest interest, when all factors are considered. We hope that understanding the situation from the standpoint of their child's developmental needs will assist parents in their choices.