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Family Bedrooms Still Popular Even with School-aged Children

By Judy Arnall

“But Mom! You don’t have to sleep alone!” Kyle protests to his mom when she suggests that he might want to sleep in his own room. Family bedrooms are increasingly becoming common in North America thanks to the attachment parenting movement that recognizes that babies and toddlers are not developmentally ready to sleep on their own for the first few years of life.

However, Kyle is seven years old, not two. The prevalence of family bedrooms among families with school-aged children has not been studied, let alone talked about openly in our society yet, but the trend is growing.

Many children, especially those that don’t have siblings to snuggle in with, continue to sleep in the same family bedroom as their parents, well into the school-aged years. Because of high profile cases such as the late Michael Jackson issue where he openly talked about sleeping with older children in a non-sexual way, causing such public distaste, many families do not admit to anyone outside their close family relatives that they sleep with their children, again, in a caring, non-sexual way. The fear of being investigated by child welfare authorities is the biggest barrier against discussing this practice. So the practice occurs quite often, but is not openly admitted. As a society, we accept family bedrooms for motels rooms, visiting at relatives, camping and vacations, but not for everyday use in a society that values independence at all cost. Still, parents persist. “We co-sleep because it’s a cultural choice. My husband is Vietnamese and I am Canadian and we have decided that it’s what works best for our family. Back in Vietnam my husband’s sisters still sleep with their mother and my husbands’ brother and father also share a room. The younger ones are all in their 20’s and it is not illegal or abnormal or culturally odd like it is here,” says *Cheryl, mom of two children.

How does a family bedroom work? Two hundred years ago, before the invention of central heating, most of the family slept in the same room if not the same beds. Fast forward to the twenty first century, where bedrooms now have the square footage size of the average 1950’s house, the family bedroom can easily accommodate two king-size mattresses on the floor or several beds in the same room.

Not everyone agrees with the concept of a family sharing sleep in the same room. Barbara Evans, a parent educator from Beaumont, Texas, worries about the parent’s need for privacy and intimacy. “My concerns are that as parents, our job is to raise healthy, loving and lovable, independent (heavy on the independent) children. Not to the exclusion of depriving them of

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nurturing and cuddling, but this may be the first place to start learning about boundaries and selfcare.”

Why do families choose a family bedroom? No separation anxiety issues and no bedtime battles is the biggest reason. For an increasingly separated family where both parents might work in paid work all day and children are away at school, it is comforting and enjoyable to cuddle together at the end of a busy day. “The best thing about having the kids there with us is the emotional bond we have with them. We love the time upstairs to talk in bed, read, write or just watch T.V. together. There's no separation between us and we don't send our kids away at night to be alone unless they want to.” says *Ally, mom of three children, ages 9, 10, and 12. They have a big master bed for the parents and two mattresses on the floor on either side of the master bed for the children.

What age should family bedrooms stop? Children naturally develop the desire for more privacy at puberty and tend to want their own room and sleeping space by the age of 12 or 13. This occurs naturally whether they sleep alone, or share a bedroom with siblings or with parents.

Most experts agree that the rules are simple. Generally, all members of the family must wear night clothes. Whoever doesn't like the arrangement and says “no” should have their wishes honoured whether they are the parent or the child. The parents might enjoy the closeness, but if the 8-year-old wants his own room, that should be respected. And of course, couple sexual intimacy must take place in another room.

Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau once said, “The government has no business in the bedrooms of the nation.” And for many families, that rings truer than ever.

Family Bedroom Pointers

1. Parental sexual relations must take place in a private room away from the eyes and the ears of the children.
2. Whoever says “no” rules. This must work for everyone
3. When children hit puberty, their natural desire for more privacy will take over and the concept of the family bedrooms should be reviewed by the family.

*Names changed upon request.

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