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## Bed-Time Stories: San Diego Parents Get Toddlers to Jump From the Crib to the Bed

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

The thought of transitioning a toddler from crib to bed is enough to give parents nightmares. They imagine their young adventurer roaming at odd hours with the glee of newfound freedom, or making a beeline to snuggle in with Mommy and Daddy, snatching the few hours parents have alone.

Here a San Diego pediatrician and several local families share tips and insights earned with yet another step away from babyhood.

Suzanne Mills, M.D., a pediatrician based in Carmel Valley, explains, "Any sleep problems, such as night waking, are better addressed while the child is still confined to the crib.

"Also it's important that they get used to having the door shut or a gate at the door before they begin sleeping in a bed. [That way they learn] the door is not meant as a punishment or anything negative. It simply keeps them confined to their room so they can't be wandering the house in the middle of the night. However if the child can climb out of the crib they need to be moved to the bed more rapidly for safety reasons."

Mills offers a couple of suggestions for parents who decide to transition their toddler to a bed before they are able to climb out of the crib. The timing and the method of moving a child to a bed, according to Mills, "depends on the degree of attachment they have to the crib. It can help to set the bed up with the crib still in the room. Have them practice getting used to their new bed by napping in it and being on it for reading time while they're getting comfortable with the switch-over."

If a child is not feeling ready to let go of the crib but the parents find it necessary to take the crib out of the room, a compromise might soften the change. Mills says that one option is "to put the crib mattress on the floor if they're especially attached to the crib. Get them used to sleeping on the floor and then it's an easier transition to move to the bed."

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Mills adds that, once they do move to a bed, side barriers are important to keep the child from falling out, at least until the child gets accustomed to their new sleep-time parameters.

Kim and Ed Bryant of El Cajon are the parents of Jared, 4 and Julia, 2. As they prepare for Julia's transition, Kim remembers taking a gradual approach with Jared. Julia was born in March of 2002, when Jared was 20 months old. A very mobile toddler, his parents decided to begin easing Jared into a bed one month after Julia arrived.

To help him feel part of the process, they took Jared with them to buy the bed and let him help pick out the bedding. They set up the bed, leaving the crib in its place, knowing that Jared needed plenty of time for transitions of any sort.

Kim and Ed wanted to let Jared set the pace in getting used to the idea of a bed. They gated his door to keep him from roaming the house. For a few months he would take naps in his bed and sleep in his crib at night. "He seemed to need the security of his crib at night. Sometimes he would start out in his bed, but would climb into his crib," Kim says. One night Jared fell from his crib while climbing out, which spurred his parents to remove the crib.

Julia, who turned two in March, still sleeps in her crib.

Amber and Matt of La Mesa decided to move their son Luke to a bed when he was just 15 months old. He had climbed out of his crib at 11 months. "He never liked his crib, never seemed to like the feeling of being enclosed," Amber says. Though it seemed too early to move him to a bed at 11 months, Amber spent many nights worried that he would get out again.

He would wake up very easily throughout the night; Amber remembers being afraid to get up to go to the bathroom because Luke would usually hear her and wake up, distraught. Some nights, out of desperation, Amber would lay on the floor with Luke to calm him down. Their pediatrician agreed that Luke should be moved to a bed due to his advanced mobility and intense dislike of his crib.

Luke watched his father setting up the bed and apparently approved of the idea because he wanted to help. He loved his new bed. Four weeks into the process, Amber shares, "Our biggest fear was that he'd go to our bed, and he does, but we just put him back in his bed and then he usually sleeps through the rest of the night. It's a big difference from him waking up crying through the night in his crib." Luke usually has a few nights a week when he sleeps straight through now, which was unheard of when he was in his crib.

Gardenia Gomez and her husband, Jim Fisher, of La Mesa, continue to work with their son, Cameron, 3 1/2, on staying in his bed. Another agile youngster, Cameron climbed out of his crib at 25 months. They then took the rail off of his crib, creating a "day bed." He didn't like the change, and used to call out for his parents and get out of bed a lot, heading straight for their room. His parents were used to interrupted sleep, since Cameron had been a light sleeper from birth.

When Cameron's baby sister, Ella, was six months old, she needed the crib, so Gardenia and Jim bought a twin mattress and put it on Cameron's floor. Cameron was 32 months old and his eyes lit up when his parents told him he was allowed to jump on the mattress.

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Gardenia and Jim assumed their weary nights were over when they saw how excited Cameron was to have a “big boy bed.” With hopeful hearts, Cameron’s parents tucked him in for his first nap in his new bed. He slept well, much to Gardenia and Jim’s relief. However, after about a week, their night-time dilemmas returned and persist to this day. Cameron continues to visit his parents at night.

“We tried taking his videos away as a consequence, but that didn’t work. We’ve also tried rewards like gum, candy or cheesecake. This tends to work for a few days and then it doesn’t matter to him. What works right now is that he doesn’t get a story the next night if he got out of bed the night before. As he matures he understands consequences a lot better,” says Gomez.

Cameron’s younger sister, Ella, turned one in May. She has always been a sound sleeper.

Juliet and Justin Salbato of Fletcher Hills, are in the process of transitioning their second child, Fiona, 20 months. Juliet is due in October with their third child. When a friend offered them a twin bed, Juliet decided to put the bed in Fiona’s room.

“We left the crib in, and she sleeps in both. Sometimes when she’s in her bed, she’ll call and want to go back into her crib. She can’t open the door, though, which is good,” says Juliet.

Fiona’s brother, Gideon, was two when he moved to the bed. Juliet remembers, “Three months into the process, he learned how to open his door and started coming to our bed several times a night. But we always marched him straight back to his room and he got the message quickly.” Gideon is now four and is a good sleeper.

The Salbatos plan to take Fiona’s crib out of her room a month or two before the baby arrives, hoping she will be content in her bed by then. Juliet says, “I’m much less worried about the whole thing with Fiona. With the second child it just doesn’t feel like such a huge issue.”

In my case, my husband and I gambled on more of an abrupt approach with our sons, who both slept through the night in their cribs, but were becoming interested in climbing.

When we felt the time was right, we arranged for the erstwhile crib-sleeper to be out of the house while we removed the crib and replaced it with a bed. We had a hunch our little guys would protest the dismantling of the crib and reject the bed if they took part in the process.

We were relieved that both sons were delighted with their new wide-open spaces. Not that we haven’t had our share of bumpy nights. My most sage advice is to stick to your child’s bedtime routine through your chosen course of transition; it will be a dependable comfort while muddling through the growing pains.

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