



Indian children tend to share bedrooms with their parents for years. Don't they need their own space?

by Tavishi Paitandy Rastogi

**S** EVEN-YEAR-OLD Rohan Mathur does most of his chores on his own. Bathing, dressing for school, eating his meals... he manages all by himself. But once a day, he kicks and screams for his mother. That's at bedtime. However hard they try, Rohan's parents cannot convince him to sleep alone in his own bedroom.

"He is in his room the whole day," says Rohan's mother, Ratna. "Plays there, has his toys, clothes, bags, everything, there. But at bedtime, he wants to be with us."

Ratna is torn. On the one hand, she wants Rohan to be independent. On the other, she doesn't want to push Rohan out of their bed. "We don't want him to feel unwanted and scared," she says.

All over the country, children tend to sleep in their parents' bedroom for a long, long time. No parent wants her child to be scared. But isn't there a case to be made for independence too?

#### SOCIAL NOTES

"This is a socio-cultural phenomenon," says Dr Soornu Udani, consultant pediatrician, Hinduja Hospital, Mumbai. "Our social fabric is such that we tend to encourage the 'child in the same room' phenomena. It also has to do with things like space constraints, joint family set ups or single child phenomena."

Space constraints... well, little can be done about that. But assuming there is a room that can become the child's room, what's the correct age for a child to begin sleeping alone?

"One year is good enough an age for a child to move into a separate space. It is not only healthy, but also important for the child's growth and development," says Dr Nitin Verma, senior consultant pediatrician, Max Healthcare, Delhi.

#### GET MOVING

There are two important reasons why children should sleep separately from the parents. One, if the parents are still sexually active, it is better for both the child and the parents to sleep apart. Equally important, though, is the fact that children need, at some point, to become independent and develop confidence. And that can only happen when they're aware they have their own space.

Experts think a year is old enough for a child to have a room of her own. Parents usually think otherwise. After all, they argue, a child needs the comfort of his or her parents. And what about all those theories that touching, love and affection are necessary for growth?

"Making the child sleep in a different room does not mean that a parent loves a child less," says Dr Verma. "It is just making the child aware of the space around him. If done in a positive manner, it will only be beneficial."

Teacher Sonali Mohan agrees. "My older daughter slept with my husband

and I till she was three-and-a-half years old. But that was because ours is a joint family set-up and we had just one room to ourselves. Then I cleared out a small anteroom adjoining ours and shifted her there. Her fears were put to rest when she was assured we were right in the next room and would be at her side the second she needed us."

#### FEAR AND LOATHING

All children aren't the same. Some may be more sensitive and imaginative. That's no reason to coddle them, though, says child psychologist Bhavya Mehra. "All the more reason to put their fears to rest so they become more confident," she says. "The parents must listen to all the fears of the child and dismiss each of them with love and logic. Children are intelligent. It is necessary to make them understand that there is nothing to fear. For example, if the child says there is something under the bed, the parent must show the empty space to the child and assure her / him that there is nothing there."

If these childhood fears are not curbed at the right age, say experts, they can be detrimental to a child's confidence. "It is a tough thing to do, especially when we all are brought up to believe that sleeping with the parents gives a sense of belonging to the child," says Mehra. "But parents must understand that whatever the reason for a child's fears, all fears can be put to rest."

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#### MAKE THE SHIFT

- Put the child to sleep in a separate cot next to the mother right from the beginning
- Create a room where the child is happy and comfortable
- Generate a sense of security in your child
- Don't let your own fears such as not having enough time with the child be a reason to keep him or her in your bedroom
- Monitor the child and his or her movements with alarm bells so you are on instant call
- Show affection all the time, not just at bedtime



**"MAKING YOUR CHILD SLEEP IN A DIFFERENT ROOM DOESN'T MEAN YOU LOVE HER OR HIM ANY LESS"**