



Table of Contents

**Is your Child Ready?..... 2**

    Wait! Is Your Child Ready for a Big Bed? ..... 3

    Cognitive Checklist ..... 3

**Plan for Success..... 4**

    Tools ..... 4

    Clear Boundaries and Expectations..... 5

        Rewards..... 5

        Make sure you are ready to enforce the new rules around the Big-Bed..... 6

    Consequences ..... 7

    Don't forget to Celebrate! ..... 8

**Conclusion:..... 8**

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## Is your Child Ready?

The one mistake people make is that they often do this too soon. I find the perfect age to transition from a crib to a bed is around three to four years of age. Anything before two and a half I find that the child is just not cognitively ready to understand that there are consequences to behavior and the transition tends not to go very well.

Younger toddlers do not have much impulse control. Whether your toddler is an independent sleeper or not, when they get into bed awake, it is not likely that they will stay there. This can lead to a whole new realm of sleep issues: bedtime battles, frequent visits during the night, and early-morning waking's.

Younger toddlers really need the physical boundary of the crib until they are a bit older. It is also a safety issue when a very young child has free-rein to wander house in the middle of the night.

Some parents are eager to transition their little one from a crib to a bed. Many do it out of urgency when their toddler is suddenly able to climb out of the crib, others do it out of excitement about the event itself or in preparation for a new baby. As the saying goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If your child is sleeping well in their crib, ride that wave as long as possible. If you suddenly have a crib escape artist on your hands, here are some recommendations to try before making the big switch.

### Ways to Keep Your Child in the Crib:

- Drop the mattress as low as possible. Some cribs allow the mattress to go all the way to the floor.
- If the front of the crib is lower than the other sides, try to put the shortest side against the wall.
- If your child is climbing out with their legs, use a sleep sack of "Naughty Monkey Pajamas". This will prevent them from swinging a leg over.
  - If your child is climbing out using their upper body strength- you are stuck, unless you can lower the crib.

**Please note-** Moving to a big bed will only amplify any sleep problems your child is having. Working on clear boundaries, and good sleep skills should be the first step before resorting to a big bed. If you need some help with this, contact me and I will customize a solution for your family that will help everyone sleep well in no time!



## **Wait! Is Your Child Ready for a Big Bed?**

- Ideally 3 years of age or older, at a bare minimum- 2.5 years old
- Outgrowing their crib weight/height limit
- Climbing out of the crib and you've tried all the steps to keep your child in crib
- Passed the Cognitive Check list

Before making the switch, it is important to consider your child's level of cognitive awareness. If your toddler is not old enough to understand simple directions or rules, it is best to hold off until they are slightly older. We don't want any tiny humans running around the house unsupervised in the middle of the night. Without the cognitive ability to understand boundaries, you could have a major mischief-maker on your hands.

### **Cognitive Checklist**

- My child is able to follow rules
- My child can follow 2-3 step directions
- My child enjoys praise and understands consequences
- My child has age-appropriate impulse control
- My child has an age-appropriate understanding of safety



## Plan for Success

### Tools

1. **Bedtime Routine Chart:** Make a Bedtime Routine Chart with actual pictures of your child doing each part of their routine, including a picture of your child and both happy parents, smiling in the morning after they've slept all night; or you can create your own using clipart images from the internet. This should be hung up centrally located to the bedtime routine. Your child should be in charge of checking out the bedtime routine, and telling you what happens first, next, etc. There are a few different ways you can use it; the level of involvement will depend on your child:
  - o Use it as is, and he can just point out the next task
  - o You can laminate it or put it in a sheet protector, and use a white board marker to cross off each task after it's completed
  - o You can give a sticker at the bottom for each day after the entire routine is complete.
2. **Toddler Clock:** Toddler clocks are super helpful in setting boundaries for children and helping them to learn the expectations around sleep. You can set it to "wake up" or change colors at a certain time so your child knows when it is okay to get out of bed in the morning. If your toddler wakes up during the night, you should reference the clock to help them understand that they are not to get out of bed to come find a parent. You would remind your child that the clock does not yet say it is morning, so it's not time to get out of bed.
3. **Security Blanket/Lovey:** A small lovey or security blanket is a fantastic way to encourage sleeping through the night and taking restorative daytime naps. A comfort object can help a child feel safe, loved, and secure, especially in a new bed. I would recommend keeping your child's lovey in their sleep space so that it remains especially helpful in keeping your child in bed.
4. **Blackout Shades:** Any type of light can inhibit melatonin production which can make it harder for children to fall asleep at bedtime, stay asleep throughout the night, and keep them asleep when the sun rises in the morning. It can also make it painfully difficult for your child to nap during the day. Darkness also helps to reduce distractions. By ensuring your child's bedroom is completely dark - as dark during the day as it is at night - you will be setting them up for long nights and successful, restorative naps.



## **Clear Boundaries and Expectations**

Setting your expectations early will reduce push back and help your toddler feel a sense of mastery and achievement when they follow the rules. It may help to make a sleep rules chart. It should lay out at least three rules:

1. Stay in your bed
2. Lay quietly
3. Do not get out of bed until the clock says it's morning

You will have to have a family discussion to determine what is expected of your child at bedtime. Are they allowed to leave the room to go potty or do they have to call you? Are they allowed to get up with their clock or do they need to wait for you to come get them? You may need to tackle some issues as they arise but being as proactive as possible will keep you from negotiating with your toddler at 2:00 a.m. about whether or not he is allowed to come into your bed to sleep. Keep it simple though; too many rules can overwhelm and confuse young toddlers.

It can also be helpful to make a "social story" bedtime book starring your child. Lay out the expectations in a positive and fun way to encourage your toddler to follow at the rules at bedtime.

## **Rewards**

For younger toddlers, sticker charts just don't usually hold the same weight as a tangible reward. I recommend having a "treasure box" filled with dollar-spot toys that your child can choose from when they've followed the sleep rules and had a good night in their bed. This treasure box ONLY comes out in the morning and is ONLY offered if the sleep rules you've laid out were followed. If a rule is broken, no need to reprimand; simply reassure your toddler that you are certain the next night will go much better and you are very excited to let him or her choose a treasure tomorrow morning when they've followed the sleep rules.



### **Make sure you are ready to enforce the new rules around the Big-Bed**

One thing that happens with almost every child is that there's a little bit of a honeymoon period. Once they move to the big-kid bed, they're really excited, they feel really special, and they often don't test boundaries. They just politely go to sleep every night and parents often think, "Alright! That was easy."

Then, about two to four weeks after the move, things begin to change. Now your child is comfortable there, they understand what's going on, and they start to realize, "You know what? I can get out of bed. I could go see what Mom and Dad are up to. I could play with some toys in my room." That's usually where the trouble starts.

Usually toddlers test boundaries in really subtle, clever ways; just asking for one tiny extra thing, maybe coming out just once the first night but then coming out twice the next night, and so on. Pretty soon, this can snowball right out of your control and suddenly you are running around the house fetching drinks and snacks, adjusting the thermostat, and performing circus acts at the pleasure of your dictatorial toddler. Bottom line: you really need to nip it in the bud as soon as problems arise. You should not allow stall tactics at bedtime, so make sure that whatever your child might typically ask for (a trip to the potty, a drink of water, lots of hugs/kisses, a pair of socks, the fan on/off, etc.) is included in the bedtime routine.



## Consequences

The word consequence often gets a bad rap and can send shivers up parents' spines. Simply put, consequences are the result of an action or condition. If I don't pay my electricity bill, I won't have power for the month. If I work hard, I get that promotion I've earned. No one likes laying down the law and playing "bad cop", but when it comes to toddlers, it is so, so important to set boundaries. Without limits, toddlers can feel very insecure and out of control. Though it may not seem like it at the time, by having clear guidelines around bedtime (and elsewhere) makes children feel very secure and loved.

When I work one-on-one with toddler(+) clients, I recommend a firm and consistent approach to consequences at bedtime. We cannot make a child fall asleep, but we can encourage sleep-inducing behavior: laying quietly, remaining in bed, and closing their eyes. Once you have completed your routine and said goodnight, your child is to stay in their bed. Should your little one get out of bed after this, give them one warning: "It is time to lay in bed quietly. You may not come out of your room. If you come out of your room again, then 'X' will happen." I recommend using the consequence of shutting the door all the way to the "click" for a minute at a time. Most toddlers sleep with their door open, at least a crack, and the idea of the door being closed all the way is a really significant consequence that they don't like.

If they did come out again, you would say, "Okay, back to bed." and calmly return them to their room. Once your child is back in bed, close the door all the way. You may have to hold it shut if they are on the other side trying to pry it open, but only hold it closed for one minute. We're just sending a message that coming out of their room is not acceptable and that there will be a consequence if they do. After the minute is up, you can open the door, get them back in bed, and allow them to try again. If they come out a second time, you're going to close the door for two minutes in the same manner as before. As your child tests the boundaries around this, just keep increasing the time spent with the door closed. There will come a time where your little one decides that it makes more sense to stay in bed and have that door open a crack than it does to keep getting out and having it closed. Typically, it's a very effective consequence.

Nine out of ten toddlers respond well to this "closing the door" strategy but if it doesn't work, then you can do something like taking away a lovey for a minute at a time. If they have a special friend that they sleep with, you could take it away in a similar fashion – not for the whole night, but just for small increments of time until they realize that it makes more sense to cooperate.



## **Don't forget to Celebrate!**

If your little one has followed the bedtime rules you have laid out for them, make sure to let them know just how proud you are the next morning! Have Dad call from work, tell Grandma to FaceTime, and of course give your babe all the hugs and kisses (and maybe a prize from the treasure box too!)

This encouragement will keep your child successful night after night.

### **Conclusion:**

This guide will help you set you up success through the transition to a big bed. If something has come up and derailed your transition, and you need helping getting on track- or maybe you just you would like guidance through the transition, e-mail me! I would be happy to help you through. We will find the right level of support for you, maybe a single phone call, or if you need more e-mail or phone support through the transition. I am always here for you and your child, no matter what comes up. New baby, new struggles? I'm here for that as well!

Hang on to those cribs as long as you can. There is no need to move a happily sleeping toddler. Obviously if they're trying to leap out head-first, then yes, perhaps consider moving to a big kid bed. If they're happy there, let it be.

Sleep well!

*Erin Lawyer*

[Erin@Chasingdreamssleep.com](mailto:Erin@Chasingdreamssleep.com)