

REAL MEN SLEEP WITH THEIR KIDS:

a father's take on sharing a family bed

by Terry Bain

My son is asleep downstairs, in my bed. He's been sleeping in my bed every night for over two years. This is where he should sleep. This is where all my children will sleep. I can't imagine it any other way.

But I haven't always felt this way. Twenty-six months ago, for instance, it hadn't occurred to me that my children would share sleep with me. I suppose I assumed they would spend a few weeks there as infants, but then you moved them into cribs, right? Isn't that what cribs are for? For sleeping children?

My wife is the smart one. She read up on shared sleep. (She reads up on everything.) She read about all the advantages of having children sleep in your bed. She talked to people who'd done it, and she talked me into letting our son into our bed.

If you're a man with a new baby who's always telling people you're jealous of the bond between mother and child, and if your child isn't yet sleeping in your bed, I say to you: Bring your baby in, get to know him, sleep with him. If someday you want to share your child's daydreams, take a step in the right direction by first sharing his night dreams.

After many months of my son sleeping with us, I am intimately familiar with his needs both at night and during the day--even if I'm not always the one who can fulfill them. (I can't, after all, nurse him or be his mother.) I feel as if I am in sync with him as I have been with no other human. I don't think I even knew what it meant to be so familiar with another human. And I cannot explain to you how exhilarating that is. You have to experience it for yourself.

This is not an essay in the traditional sense. It's a marketing letter. It's a call to action. It's a manifesto for new fathers.

Why new fathers? It's my presumption--one not based on a poll or a survey or scientific evidence but entirely on my experience--that when a child does sleep with the rest of the family, it is usually the mother's idea. And this is fantastic. Mothers can act as the weather center for a baby's needs, in both calm seas and stormy ones. They cease to be so only when societal pressure (husbands, mothers, best friends, the media) causes them to question the readouts, to deny the evidence of a serious storm, to disregard the 200 mph winds and circling funnel clouds. This is why I tell future mothers that even if they don't think their husbands will go for it, if it's something they feel passionate about--whether it be shared sleep or issues of vaccination or nursing--suggest it to your husband, encourage your husband. Ply him with logic. Ask him why he'll let the dog sleep on the bed but not the baby. Don't make him feel like a fool,

but do make him feel as if he's part of the decision-making process--and do not give up on the things you believe in.

But before you do any of that, let him read this article. Because right now, I want to take the new fathers--or even better, the soon-to-be new fathers--aside. Come over here. Let's talk.

Here's what I have to say to you: Be a man--invite your children into your bed. In the short run it may seem inconvenient or downright weird, but in the long run you will both benefit.

Somehow, a lot of men--even those who might otherwise consider themselves enlightened--have been physiochemically convinced that to be a father is to be a distant, booming, rule-setting machine. They have also been trained (as have many women, I'm afraid) that sleep is somehow prurient, that "sleeping with" someone is somehow equal, or nearly equal to having sex with that person. This, of course, is a ludicrous presumption and leads to erroneous logic. Anyone accustomed to having sex knows that it is much more pleasurable if done when awake; furthermore, there are many more interesting places in the world to do it than in bed. Put your child in bed, then explore your household.

One concern I've heard from new parents about children in bed is that they feel as if they are going to roll over and crush their baby. But every night I've slept with my son, I've known exactly where he was at every moment, even when I was asleep, even when he was very small. I'm always aware of his presence, just as I would be of any other body in my bed; when he was wedged in next to me, I'd roll off the bed before I'd roll over him. Here's my advice: Do not go into your family bed altered by any drug, including alcohol or prescription drugs, and you will do no harm to your baby in your sleep.

Certainly, sleeping with another human in bed will modify your sleep patterns and cause some crowding--but as a new father, believe me, your sleep patterns are going to be modified anyway. Do you really want to get out of bed and go into the next room to fetch the baby for every feeding? (And men, if you insist on keeping the baby in another room, I suggest that at the very least, you do the fetching.) Do you really want to check your baby's breathing every six seconds because you can't hear it on the monitor? Don't do this to yourself. Instead, check the baby's breathing by watching her sleep, by listening to her soft breath, by catching some of that oddly familiar scent as it blows in and out of the tilted little O of her mouth.

I'm not the same person I was when my wife first said to me, "I want our baby to sleep with us." In those days--ah, so many months ago--I thought she was crazy, a little nuts, at least hormonally imbalanced. Nobody does that, do they? Not real people. Do they? They do? Okay, we'll try it. But it won't last. You'll see.

"People do this," she said. "A lot of real people. And a lot of men think it's a good idea." She provided me with a lot of information on the subject, and now I'm

completely turned in the other direction. *Now* I think that anyone who lets his baby sleep in another room is crazy, a little nuts, at least hormonally imbalanced.

Perhaps I'm completely blindfolded by my infatuation with being a father. But just yesterday my son woke too early from a nap. I went in and settled him down in my usual fashion, by laying him on my chest and sitting up against the headboard, rubbing his back. Also in our usual fashion, the two of us fell asleep there, his arms around me and mine around him, each of us probably snoring quietly. I share rhythms and dreams with my son--real rhythms and real dreams. Quite musical, quite colorful, quite gorgeous dreams. So if this is a blindfold, please make sure the knot is tied well in back. I wouldn't want it to fall off.

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