



## The common room

Bigger houses mean a separate room for our toddlers to sleep in. But is it good for them?

■ By Matthew Wolf-Meyer

Paul is the manager of the customer support section of a mid-sized technology firm. He has a wife and a son, and almost regular sleep patterns, without many complaints. He and his wife share their bed with their young son, which sometimes leads to disrupted sleep. Yet generally, Paul is well rested by the time he starts his workday. However, his employees can't say the same about their sleep. This is because, while Paul starts his day at 8am, his employees start their day at 9.30pm. Paul's office is in California and his employees work from Bangalore.

Paul sleeps at similar times as his friends and co-workers in the U.S. but his employees sleep out-of-sync with their families and friends in India. Reporting to work at 9pm and working 10 hours often means going to bed when family members are eating breakfast, ergo waking up in the early evening. Although many people are able to acclimatise to this kind of socially desynchronised sleep, about 10 per cent of people develop 'shift work sleep disorder', which is characterised by intense insomnia despite being tired.

But even when people are able to adjust to these unusual sleep demands, they become estranged from their friends and family, which can lead to feelings of social isolation and depression.

### Imperative need

Changing sleep patterns around the world might be one of the least discussed effects of the global integration of

the economies, information technology and high-speed travel. Between the 1970s and 1990s, economists and social scientists imagined that we were moving toward a 24-hour society, a world in which anything would be available to anyone, at any time of the day. In some sense, they were right—with the internet, the whole world is now accessible at any time.

Another example: since the 1930s, American homes have been built with a room for every family member—and in wealthy homes, sometimes two or more rooms for each family member. So, Paul sharing a bed with his wife and young son, is a recent development in the U.S.

### Understanding research

New ways of getting children to sleep have started to become popular. This has led to what's referred to as the Cry It Out method [CIO] where infants would be placed in a crib by themselves with the expectation that they would 'self-soothe' and eventually be able to put themselves to sleep. Meanwhile, anxious parents would brace themselves for hours of their child crying and would be awoken hours later to the child crying once again, laying in bed alone in his or her room. But after 50 years of crying infants, American parents have come around to bedsharing. Rather than placing an infant in her or his bed, in her or his own room, most parents have started to sleep with their children. Part of this change has been facilitated by the science around Sudden Infant Death Syndrome [SIDS], which

claims the lives of thousands of American babies each year. SIDS is marked by parents finding their infant child dead in its sleep, often without explanation. By moving children into their parents' beds, scientists at the *University of Notre Dame* found that SIDS risks were significantly reduced. Around the same time, interests in 'Attachment parenting' forwarded by paediatrician William Sears—have reintroduced parents to a style of sleep that people around the world practise without hesitation. Americans are still unsure about bedsharing, and many paediatricians and parenting experts also criticise it. But the evidence from James McKenna's laboratory at *Notre Dame* is fairly clear: careful parents, who take the necessary precautions, might receive up to two extra hours of sleep each night.

For those parents who are still wary about sharing their beds, placing the child's bed in his or her parents' room is recommended, often referred to as co-sleeping. While this doesn't stop parents from being woken up in the middle of the night, it does seem to ease some parental anxieties—and infant anxieties—about being in separate rooms.

### Moving from opinions to recommendation

Styles of sleep, like bedsharing, co-sleeping, and desirable sleep, like eight hours of consolidated nightly sleep, are all heavily informed by social norms and reflect



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ideas about what makes a good worker and family member. American sleep patterns have long embraced the idea that everyone should be able to self-soothe, that being an individual who can take care of oneself is the most important outcome of one's training in sleep—an idea often reflected even in the bedtime stories read to children.

Today, as Indian families too enjoy the luxury of more space in their homes, and more space for each family member, they may also find themselves confronting parenting advice that would make their sleep much more American. In other words, sleeping less with children and more in isolated beds. But, if the American experience with the past

## The bedtime story

In India, it has been a practice, since centuries, to put the baby to sleep with the mother. By and far, this is quite safe. However, there is a theoretical danger of the baby being smothered or getting choked. This is especially true if either of the parents is on medications, or are habituated to taking alcohol or drugs, which cause sleepiness. In such cases, sleeping with the baby should be avoided.

Also, putting the baby to sleep in a crib is usually a safe practice, preferred more in foreign countries than in India. Abroad, children are made to sleep in a crib separately, right from the day they are born. However in India and in many South Eastern countries, it is not common to separate the mother and child so soon, and most babies sleep with the mother, at least for the first few months.

As far as the 'Cry It Out' method is concerned, in my opinion and experience, it is better for the parents to let the baby cry and go back to sleep rather than picking her up or pacifying her as babies tend to get used to this extra attention and care and tend to wake up very often for no obvious reason except to get the parent's attention. This becomes a big problem for the parents eventually as they become sleep-lagged, while the baby is able to compensate for the lost sleep during the day. The earlier the baby learns to sleep without any props or help from outside, the better for her and for the parents.


Though no age has been defined for making the baby sleep separately, it's seen that the baby is put to sleep in a separate bed from anywhere between 6 – 12 months.

■ By P V Vaidyanathan  
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century of children's sleep is any guide, Indian families might be better off skipping to the end of the story and preserving bedsharing and co-sleeping to avoid a century of sleep-related agony.


When our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our children are at risk, it might be worth articulating a future of sleep that is both more thoughtful and more restful.






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