

# SLEEP SPECIAL

## Three in a bed?

I have to admit that when I first picked up a book called *Three in a Bed*, I wasn't expecting it to be about sharing your sleeping space with a baby. Once I'd got over that slight disappointment, though, I was intrigued. I honestly can't remember whether the idea of sleeping with your baby struck me as completely obvious, and something I'd have expected to do, or whether it hadn't ever occurred to me and I was just convinced by the book. But well before my baby was born I'd decided to give it a go.

It seemed to me that putting your baby into a separate cot (let alone a separate room) wasn't something that most people in most societies would do – it didn't seem quite natural, and it certainly didn't seem very convenient. I'm always struck by just how many people used to be packed into one bed in the past, a result of how many people would have lived in a house in the centuries before nuclear families became the norm. Anyway, it seemed to me that sharing a bed with your baby was something that mothers had probably done for hundreds of years.

The thing that seems to put most people off co-sleeping is the fear that they'll roll onto the baby – and when you have a fragile newborn, you can see why this is a worry. Of course, most babies are a lot tougher than they look, but I was also reassured by the research I found. Sleeping couples had been videoed and it turned out that some unconscious instinct stops you rolling onto a baby even when you're fast asleep. The one big proviso is that those instincts won't kick in when you're drunk or otherwise incapacitated, so you do need to watch out, especially if you've been cutting out alcohol and your tolerance has gone down.

One night I had half a can of Guinness before bed – recommended by the midwife, in fact, to help make up the blood I'd lost during the birth – and got distinctly tipsy. When I woke up I

**What is co-sleeping and could it work for you?  
BECK LAXTON explains why she did it...**



didn't really remember breastfeeding Sasha at all, and wept terrible tears of

postnatal guilt at being a bad, bad, drunkard mother. Possibly it wasn't a bad thing, as it did make me careful.

We started with the huge advantage that our domestic setup was absolutely perfect for low-stress co-sleeping. We sleep on a double futon on a low platform, so the distance from the mattress to the floor is only a few centimetres – a baby that fell out of bed would be unlikely to get hurt. We'd already acquired a Moses basket, so this could sit next to the bed at much the same height.

Obviously, if your bed is way off the ground, it's not all going to be such sweetness and light. If you've got a futon anywhere, I do recommend trying co-sleeping next to the ground until you're happy with it. But young babies don't tend to wriggle much – I have friends who've done co-sleeping on a normal bed with no problems.

My biggest worry, in those early days, was whether Sasha would be warm enough: our house is old and draughty and we didn't want to have the heating on overnight. I spent anxious hours trawling the internet for advice, and was finally reassured by a table that listed night temperatures against the precise number of cellular cotton blankets to use. I made sure Sasha had a hat, too.

Then I read that duvets aren't safe for small babies, and got worried that he'd overheat. For a while we had a peculiar system where we lay under the duvet and Sasha was tucked up in blankets, but this was too elaborate to last. Eventually we realised that as long as his head didn't get under the covers too much, he'd be fine. Small babies don't have pillows either – what to do about ours? We moved them apart and stuck Sasha in the middle and that seemed to work just fine.

The system was to put Sasha to sleep in the Moses basket,

then take him up to bed with us when we went (moses baskets are wonderfully portable – very handy for those bouts of paranoia where you don't want to let a sleeping baby out of your sight). One of my worries about co-sleeping was that we might never get our bed to ourselves again, so I wanted to make sure that Sasha was happy to sleep on his own too. The basket stayed next to our bed and when he woke up later it was easy to feed him in bed and then let him drop back to sleep with us.

To start with, I sat up in bed to feed Sasha. Learning a new technique of breastfeeding lying down seemed a bit much in the early days, so I would sit up in bed to feed him. We had a dim light by the bed, and a cushion behind to lean on, and I would put on a fleece cardigan to keep warm. A water bottle lived next to the bed – in fact for most of that year I had little breastfeeding stations set up all round the house, each with a water bottle, a book to read and a cushion, in any corner where I might settle.

But of course the real advantage of co-sleeping is when you start to breastfeed lying down. Once I started, it really didn't seem that difficult, but then Sasha was always a confident feeder so I'd had an easy time of it altogether. This meant that for night-time feeds, there was no need to turn on lights or sit up: I simply rolled over to Sasha and stuck a nipple in his mouth, then dozed off again.

Sleep deprivation became a thing of the past. When people now reminisce about how awful those early days were, I feel faintly guilty, because for us it just wasn't like that. So I'm a huge fan.

What prompted us to stop co-sleeping? I can't really remember. It may have been that Sasha got too wriggly, or perhaps he started sleeping through the night and it didn't seem necessary any more. We started by moving him into a cot in our bedroom, thinking we'd make the separation gradual, but this had the disadvantage that we heard every murmur he made. For quite a while he was very bad at getting himself back to sleep once he'd woken up – and would work himself into a fury about it. Since we couldn't help, we didn't want to be able to hear quite so much of his frustration. So we moved the cot to a downstairs room, and he's stayed there ever since: the gaps in the floorboards work as well as a baby monitor for hearing what he's up to.

Was there a down side to co-sleeping? I can't think of any disadvantages. Sasha didn't take up very much space and didn't start to kick till later (although we were sometimes joined by our horribly affectionate cat, and then it did start to feel a bit crowded). We felt comfortable having sex with him there – he so obviously wasn't bothered.

These days, on weekends when we have my partner's children with us, we'll have the two of us, then be joined by Sasha, now two and a half, plus the six-year-old and the eight-year-old, and then the bloody cat as well... ♦

## ... and ELAINE WESTWICK explains why she didn't.

**S**leeping with a warm baby next to you in bed is divine. When my second son was very small I remember curling up on my side to feed him. When he'd finished he drifted off to sleep with his head nestled between my breasts. As my husband said, that's every boy's fantasy. We both slept much better than if he had been in a cot.

And yet the only times we shared a bed this way were when I was too shattered to sit up and feed. So why, when we both slept so well, did I decide not to make it a habit?

Firstly, there were downsides to the sleeping arrangements. My baby possessed a lot and it spoils the moment a little if you have to sit up and burp the baby after a feed. It spoils things even more if when you lie back you get vomit down your cleavage and have to change your clothes and even the bedding. For me, feeding in a chair meant that the sick was much easier to deal with.

I also had experience of a firstborn baby sleeping happily on their own in a cot. And when I say I slept well when my newborn baby was in bed with me, it was only well in comparison with the alternative of an unhappy boy in the cot, not well compared with to a full night's sleep in a bed on my own.

Sleep tends to be better if you are able fall asleep on your own, and settle yourself when you come into a light sleep. I decided I'd rather put in the leg work at the beginning to help my baby feel comfortable and safe in his own cot, in order to get better sleep for both of us longer term.

Some people feel it is unfair to expect babies to sleep on their own as we are social animals. I suppose it depends on the way you help your baby to sleep. I'm not in favour of just leaving a baby to cry (although I try not to rush in as they often stop of their own accord). I used the approach in the *Baby Whisperer* books by Tracey Hogg: she puts a high value on patience, saying we get into 'accidental parenting' when we need a quick fix. She suggests staying with the baby initially in order to help them fall asleep on their own eventually.

In the early days (from about one month onwards) I spent hours cuddling, putting in the cot, then taking out and cuddling again. I would intersperse hourly feeds with rocking and holding until he finally dropped off in the cot for long enough for me to leave. With time, I found I could soothe him without picking up – stroking, patting and comforting with my voice.

I normally started after bath time at 6.30pm, and to begin with it would take about three hours. Sometimes I'd give up completely, give baby to my husband and crawl into bed myself. But what kept me going was that each week the time it took got shorter, until we were approaching the magic 7pm bedtime. It took weeks and weeks with child two (and no time at all with the firstborn). I'd like to think neither ever woke up and felt alone.

Neither am I a fan of having older children sleep regularly in their parents' bed. I'm too possessive of my sleep, and of the time with my husband. I have tried to approach this in a similar fashion – it may be harder work, but it pays dividends longer term. Instead of having the child in your bed, you go to them. If they are in a cot you sit or lie next to them, if they are in a bed you can get in too. When they are comforted you return to your bed.

But just as I've occasionally co-slept with the baby, of course there have been circumstances when we've had our older boy in the bed. And as long as I'm not getting jumped on or kicked, I've cherished the shared time.

Although I have wonderful memories of sleeping together, I find the days are easier if we are all refreshed from sleeping in separate beds. ♦