



Moving to a Big Kid Bed

What to know, when to move, and how to make it smooth

A vertical photograph of a nursery shelf. The top shelf holds a white teddy bear, a smaller brown teddy bear, and a woven basket. The middle shelf has a white basket containing a yellow sheep toy. The bottom shelf features a large, light-colored woven basket with a pink stripe at the bottom, a white heart-shaped pillow, and a stack of light blue boxes. The floor is light wood.

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There's No Rush

There is absolutely no rush to move your child out of their crib.

I know it can feel like a milestone that needs to happen by a certain age. You see other children in big beds, someone mentions it at a playdate, or you're setting up a nursery for a new baby and the crib suddenly feels spoken for. But the crib is not something to escape from. For most children it is a place of genuine comfort and security, and moving out of it before they're ready almost always creates more problems than it solves.

The research is clear, and it's something I align with firmly: most children are not developmentally ready for a big kid bed until around three years old. Before that age, the vast majority of toddlers simply do not have the impulse control to understand and respect an invisible boundary. The crib walls do that job for them. Remove the walls too soon and you're asking a two year old to do something their brain genuinely isn't built for yet.

So if your child is happily sleeping in their crib, sleeping well, and not climbing out, leave them there. You are not behind. You are actually ahead.

The Only Real Reason to Move Early

There is one situation where making the move earlier than three is genuinely necessary: your child is climbing out of the crib and there is a real safety risk.

If your child can get a leg over the rail and you're worried about a fall, then yes, the big bed becomes the safer option. But before you make that call, it's worth trying a few things first. Lowering the mattress to its lowest setting, removing any furniture nearby that they might be using as leverage, and turning the crib so the taller side faces outward can all buy you more time if your child isn't quite ready for the transition.

A new sibling is not a reason to move your child out of their crib early. If anything, expecting a new baby is even more reason to keep your toddler exactly where they are. The last thing you need while navigating newborn nights is to have also unravelled your toddler's sleep progress, leaving you with two little ones waking you up. A newborn does not need a crib for the first several months, a bassinet or bedside sleeper works perfectly well, and displacing your toddler before they're ready, especially around the same time a new baby arrives, is a recipe for regression and resentment. Keep the crib for the child who needs it most right now. That is your toddler.

Sleep First, Then the Bed

This is the piece that matters most from a sleep perspective: your child should be sleeping well and consolidating 11 to 12 hours of night sleep consistently before you make this transition.

If sleep is already fragmented, frequent night wakings, early mornings, or difficulty settling, moving to a big bed will not fix any of that. It will almost always make it worse. The freedom of an open bed amplifies whatever is already happening at night. Get sleep solid first. Then, and only then, is the big bed the natural next step.



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Setting the Stage

When the time is right, how you introduce the transition makes a real difference.

Talk about it a day or two before, not weeks in advance. Toddlers don't have a strong grasp of time, and too much build-up creates anxiety as often as it creates excitement. A day or two gives them enough time to feel involved without overthinking it.

Let them be part of it. Take them to choose their sheets, their pillow, maybe a new stuffed animal for the bed. Ownership matters at this age. When a child feels like the bed is theirs and they had a say in it, they are far more likely to want to stay in it.

And here's something I recommend that makes a real difference: **keep the crib in the room while you make the transition.** Don't move it out straight away. Having the crib still present removes the pressure of a double transition. Your child isn't suddenly in a new bed in a new configuration of their space. It becomes gradual. One step at a time. If things don't go smoothly, the crib is right there. If they do, you can remove it quietly once the big bed feels completely settled.

Keep everything else identical. The bedtime routine stays the same. The timing stays the same. The order of events, the songs, the stories, the lights, none of that changes. The only new thing is the bed itself. Toddlers thrive on predictability and this transition goes smoothest when the only variable is the one you've introduced.

Before the first night, **sit down with your child and go over the rules clearly and simply.** Staying in bed. Not coming out of the room until morning. Going to sleep just like always. Keep it warm and matter of fact. They should feel excited, not pressured. One more thing, keep it neutral. It's lovely to mark the moment, but don't make it such a big event that it becomes loaded with expectation. A big deal in either direction, excitement or anxiety, can set the first night up to feel more significant than it needs to be.

Room Safety Before Night One

Before your child sleeps in an open bed for the first time, go through their room with fresh eyes and ask yourself what could be pulled over, climbed on, or accessed unsafely in the middle of the night.

Secure heavy furniture to the wall. Make sure windows are properly locked. Consider whether a stair gate at the bedroom door makes sense in the early weeks while boundaries are being established. A dim nightlight is helpful if they wake and feel disoriented.

If you're moving to a single or twin, a bed rail on the open side prevents accidental rolling and gives a little of that crib-like containment that some children find reassuring in the first few weeks.



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The Honeymoon Phase, And What Comes After

Most children go through what I call a honeymoon phase after the move to a big bed. For the first two to four weeks, things often look surprisingly smooth. Your child stays in bed, the transition seems effortless, and you wonder what all the fuss was about.

And then around week three or four, the penny drops. Your child realises they can actually get out of this thing. And they will test that. They'll appear in the living room with a very creative reason for being there. They forgot to tell you something. They need water. They can't find their toy.

This is completely normal. It is not a sign that the transition has gone wrong. It is a sign that your child is a toddler doing exactly what toddlers do, testing every door to see which ones open. Your job is to make sure the doors stay closed. Every single time.

A brief return to bed with a quiet reminder of the rules is all that's needed in those first moments. No long conversations, no frustration, no making it interesting. The less attention the behaviour gets, the less worth repeating it becomes.

You may also find that your child wakes in the night feeling a little frightened or disorientated. The open space of a big bed can feel unfamiliar in the dark. This is understandable. Respond warmly, settle them back, and then apply the same approach you used during sleep training. The skills your child already has are still there. The bed is just a different container.

If They Keep Getting Out

If calm returns to bed aren't working and your child is getting out repeatedly, here is the approach I recommend, and it starts with something positive before it ever gets to a consequence.

Start with a sticker chart. Before introducing any consequence, give your child something to work towards. Explain clearly that if they stay in their room all night, they get a sticker in the morning and a small reward. The first target is one night. Then two nights in a row. Then four. By the end of the week, if you've been consistent, the behaviour has usually resolved. This works particularly well because your child already understands routine and reward from sleep training. Use that foundation.

If the sticker chart alone isn't enough, introduce a clear choice. At the next boundary crossing, calmly let your child know: "If you come out of your bed one more time, I will need to close the door." This gives them the opportunity to choose to stay. Most children, when the consequence is clearly stated in advance, will choose correctly. Give them that chance.

If they come out again, close the door. But do it gently and with a check-in built in. Close the door, wait ten minutes, and then open it quietly to let them know you're still there and you still love them. They simply need to follow the rules. If they're back in bed and staying there, they still earn their sticker. You want to reinforce the right choice even when it came after a difficult moment. Then give them another chance with the door open. If they come out again, close it for a little longer. Repeat each time.



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If They Keep Getting Out

I know the closed door can feel harsh. But by this stage your child has been sleep trained. They know what is expected of them and they have the skills to do it. The closed door is not a punishment out of nowhere. It is a predictable, choice given consequence for a choice they've made. And because it's predictable, it works.

The key word is consistent. One night of letting it go, one moment of giving in because you're exhausted, and the lesson resets. Your consistency is the entire strategy here.

If none of this is landing and your child is under three, take a step back and ask honestly whether they were ready for this transition in the first place. It is completely okay to move them back to the crib. Frame it neutrally, no disappointment expressed, and revisit the big bed in a few weeks or months. The crib being in the room already makes this so much easier. There's no big reversal, just a quiet return to what worked. When they're truly ready, the whole thing will feel completely different.

What to Expect in the First Few Weeks

Set your expectations kindly for those first nights. Some children settle beautifully from night one. Others take time to adjust to a bigger, more open space. That is okay.

What you are looking for over the first week or two is a general trend toward settling. Not perfection on night one, but gradual improvement as the new normal becomes familiar.

Hold your routine tightly. Keep the transition neutral. Respond to testing calmly and consistently. And trust that the same child who learned to sleep well in their crib can absolutely learn to sleep well here too.

The skills are already there. The bed is just a different container.

Shelby