

Cross Cultural Perspectives on Co-sleeping



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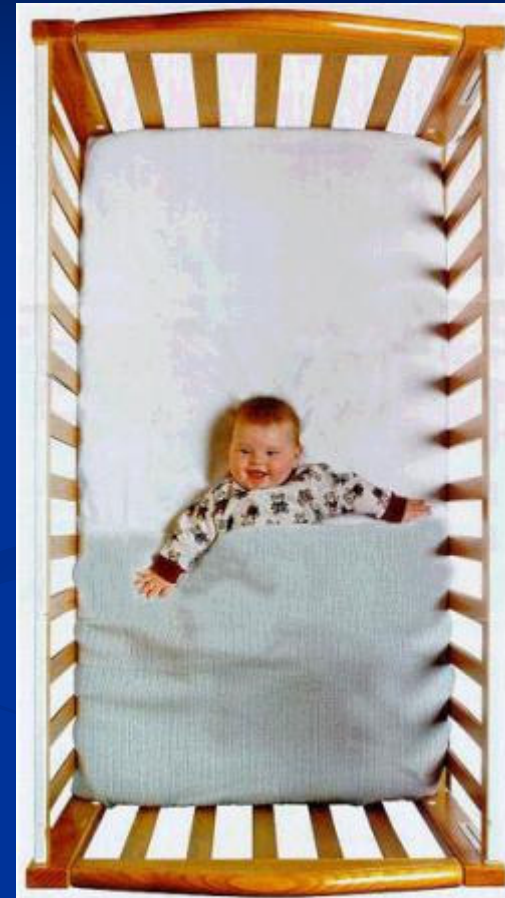
“I sleep with my baby
always. Imagine what it
would be like for her to
wake up and be all
alone?”

Thai mother, Perth August 2007.

How we sleep, where and with whom is not random – rather it is moulded by our cultural customs and traditions.

It is our culture that gives us our views about where babies and children should sleep and why.

For most of human history babies and children have slept with their mothers, or other family members. Sleeping “privacy” is still rare today – this is only a common practice in more affluent & western societies.



**In 67% of cultures around the world
today children sleep in the company of
others.**

**A study of 186 non-industrial societies
found that in:**

46% chn sleep in same bed

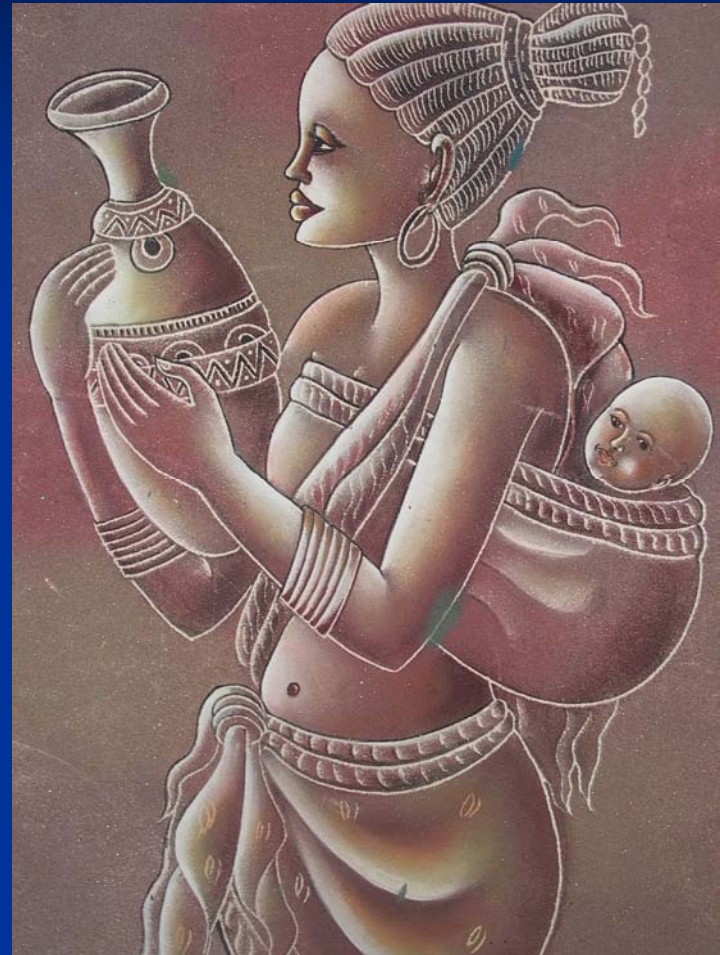
21% chn sleep in the same room.

*M.F. Small, **Our Babies, Ourselves: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way we Parent**,
Anchor Books, NY, 1998.*

**In all of these
societies infants
(under 12 months)
never slept in a
separate place.**

M.F. Small, 1998.

**In the US only 3%
under a year slept
with a parent.**



Whiting found that in 136 societies, the most common form of co-sleeping was mother with child and father somewhere else – 50%.

16% slept with both mum and dad.

**What accounts for the diversity of
cultural practices?**

Cultural values can be divided into:

Interdependence or Independence

Interdependence

“My oldest is two and a half so I don’t think that he is old enough to do what he’s expected to do here ... You have to be toilet trained by three, **YOU HAVE TO GO TO BED ALONE** ... It might work for some children, but I don’t want that for my kids.”

(Program Participant, Fredericton, NB *Attachment Across Cultures*)

Interdependence

Non-western cultures tend to focus on raising children to be a part of a larger system of relationships – to “depend” on others for their wellbeing.

Co-sleeping is one expression of this.

Interdependence

In migrant families sleeping patterns have been found to be one of the more resilient practices – it is commonly viewed as an important aspect of bonding with children.

“My 2 month old and 4 year old sleep with my husband and me. Having a child sleeping with you is a nice, gentle, good feeling. Here kids and parents sleep separately. There is no problem with my little ones sleeping with me, and it promotes the relationship between a parent and a child.”

(Program Participant, Vancouver BC *Attachment Across Cultures*)

Independence

Western cultures focus more on raising children to be self sufficient and to act on their own personal choices.

Putting infants in a separate room to sleep is one expression of this.

It can be argued
that the west is
preoccupied
with a “good”
babies’ ability to
sleep alone
through out the
night.



Small (1998) argues that this became the cultural norm because it was seen to:

a. protect husband/wife relationship

b. produce healthy psychologically healthy and independent children.

Two things highly valued by western culture.

“I am a human being
and I deserve some
time and privacy to
myself.”

M.F. Small, *Our Babies, Ourselves: How Biology and
Culture Shape the Way we Parent*, Anchor Books, NY,
1998.

In the US during the 1990s the number of mothers sharing bed with infants for part or all of the night doubled and may have reached as many as 50%.

(McKenna & Mc Dade 2005)



So within the US culture there are variations – based on both care practices such as breast feeding and ethnicity eg. African-American families (50%) sleep nightly with a parent & in parts of Appalachian Kentucky 71% room share or bed share.

No one practice is superior to another.

It is critical that we:

a. recognise differences exist within cultures and between cultures

b. recognise our own cultural biases

c. assist parents to implement sleeping arrangements that work best for them and that are safe

d. support cultural practices to be implemented in ways that minimise risk and support children's safety.

References:

Attachment Across Cultures

www.attachmentcrosscultures.org

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J. Deloache & A. Gottlieb, *A World of Babies*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

J.J. McKenna & T. McDade, 'Why Babies Should Never Sleep Alone', *Paediatric Respiratory Reviews* 2005, 6, 134 - 152