

2 years

Here's how to spot the signs that your child has outgrown his crib.

hello, **bed,** good-bye, **crib**

Tears flowed the night Gwen Cohen, a mother from Haverford, Pennsylvania, tried to get her son Keith, then 2, to sleep in his bed for the first time. "It was a night of holy terror," she recalls. "He gave us total resistance, begging us to stay longer, to give him another snack." In contrast, Keith's younger sister, Valerie—later to follow in her big brother's

footsteps—was thrilled when the time came for her transition.

Some toddlers, like Valerie, easily move from crib to bed. Yet many find the change unsettling. Accustomed to the warm, cocoonlike environment of a crib, they initially dislike the openness of a bed. The

switch can also be difficult because 2-year-olds crave familiarity, and few things are as familiar to them as their crib. You can smooth the way by becoming attuned to signs of your child's readiness, then laying the proper groundwork.

Time It Right

In general, kids are ready to make the move somewhere between the

BY TINA TRASTER

ages of 2 and 3, or when they are 34 to 36 inches tall. At this point, many have begun trying to climb out of the crib—which (apart from being risky) is an indication that they need more space. Signs of autonomy and independence also indicate readiness. These include a child who feeds himself, wants to dress himself, and takes pride in individual accomplishments. Sleeping patterns hold another clue. “Does your child cry out during the night? If you can call to her and she’s reassured without actually seeing you, she’s close to being ready for a bed,” says Kyle Pruett, M.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center, in New Haven, Connecticut. Often the transition from crib to bed is prompted by the expectation of a new baby. In such cases, parents should make sure their toddler is comfortably settled in his new bed several months before the birth of his sibling—especially if the baby will be inheriting his old crib. Otherwise, your toddler may feel he has been ousted from his safe haven.

Talk Up the Event

Make the new sleeping arrangements appealing to your child. “Say things like ‘You’re getting to be a big kid, and pretty soon you’ll be sleeping in a big-kid bed and doing all kinds of things that big kids do,’” suggests Heidi Murkoff, coauthor of *What to Expect the Toddler Years* (Workman Publishing Company Inc., 1996).

A number of children’s books, such as *My Own Big Bed* (Greenwillow, 1998), depict a young child’s journey from crib to bed. Read these stories to your child several times.

Buy the Right Bed

Experts recommend buying a twin-

night prowlers

Once your child is no longer contained by the bars of his crib, he may begin wandering around at night. Guardrails are a slight deterrent, but many toddlers can easily scale them. And though 2-year-olds are unlikely to be hurt by a fall from a bed that stands no more than two feet off the floor, they can injure themselves walking around during the night. Parents should take the following precautions:

- **Childproof your toddler’s room** by making sure all hot radiators, electric fans, lamps, appliances, and heavy objects are out of his reach.
- **Keep the path to his door clear** of furniture, toys, cords, and other obstacles he can bump into or trip over.
- **Install window guards** or locks, and make sure cords from window blinds are inaccessible.
- **Keep a night-light on**, either in his room or in the hallway.
- **Block access to the kitchen**, and install a safety gate across stairway entrances.

size bed that is built relatively close to the ground and will easily accommodate guardrails. You should also purchase a firm, tight-fitting mattress that, ideally, will last through the elementary years. Guardrails should run the full length of the bed to prevent a child who moves around a lot from falling out. You also have to make sure that your child can’t get caught in the rail itself or between the rail and the bed.

Make the Move Gently

If it’s practical, don’t pack away the crib the moment the new bed arrives. Have your child help you pick out new sheets for his bed, and let him help you make it. Arrange it like a mini home, with his favorite possessions kept within easy reach. Initially, some children even like lying inside a sleeping bag on top of the new bed because it re-creates the snug feeling of the crib.

Say a Good “Good Night”

Toddlers derive great comfort from rituals, so it’s crucial to maintain nighttime routines like bathing, singing, and reading bedtime stories in the new bed. “If your child has an absolute meltdown, don’t force her to sleep in the bed. You don’t want her to associate it with something negative,” says Palmo Pasquariello, M.D., a pediatrician in private practice in New York City.

If you’ve kept the crib in your child’s room, let her sleep there at night but encourage her to use the bed during playtime or for naps. Over time, she’ll adjust to the idea of spending the night in it. When she’s finally ready to make the switch, mark the crib’s removal with a goodbye kiss or some other small ceremony. Above all, remember that even if those first few nights are a bit bumpy, every child eventually adjusts—usually without major upheavals. □