
Sleep - children and nightmares

Most children experience nightmares from time to time. Frightening dreams can start when the child is about two years old, and reach a peak between the ages of three and six years. Nightmares usually occur later in the sleep cycle, from 4am to 6am, but the frequency differs from one child to the next.

Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often. About one quarter of children have at least one nightmare every week. A common theme is being chased by a frightening person or animal.

The cause of nightmares isn't known, but it is thought to be the ordinary stresses and strains of growing up. Children who have experienced a traumatic event, for example, tend to have frequent nightmares for the next six months or so.

A range of possible causes

Some of the possible causes of nightmares include:

- The ordinary stresses and strains of growing up
- A traumatic event, such as an accident or surgery
- Fever
- An active imagination.

Coping with your child's nightmare

Suggestions include:

- Go to your child as soon as you can. If your child's bedroom is far from yours and you can't be sure to hear them when they call or cry, consider installing a baby monitor.
- Cuddle and reassure your child. Talk calmly and gently.
- Appreciate that your child's feelings are genuine.
- Be prepared to stay with them until they have calmed down. If your child is particularly frightened, you may need to soothe them with a favourite (but relaxing) activity, such as reading a book together.
- Your child may want to talk to you about their nightmare. Encourage them to come up with alternate endings for the nightmare that are happy or funny.

Don't make things worse

You may, without meaning to, make the situation worse. Do not:

- **Ignore the child** – if you refuse to go to them, your child will only get more upset and frantic.
- **Get angry** – you may think your child is 'putting it on' for attention, or else you don't appreciate a broken sleep. Either way, expressing anger or tension will only upset your child even more.
- **Allow them to sleep with you** – when you're tired and wishing for an easy solution, it's tempting to take the child back to bed with you, but this tactic suggests to the child that sleeping in their own bed is what causes the nightmare. Eventually, they may insist on sleeping with you all the time.

Prevention suggestions

It isn't possible to stop your child from ever having another nightmare, but you may be able to reduce the frequency of bad dreams. Suggestions include:

- Make sure your child doesn't watch frightening shows on television, or read scary books.
- Consider your child's daily routine. Is anything troubling them? Stressful events that could trigger a spate of nightmares include a new sibling, moving house or starting school.
- Talk about dreams together, and explain that everyone has dreams and occasional nightmares.
- If your child is troubled by a recurring nightmare, help them to explore its meaning through drawing, writing or play acting. Thinking about the nightmare creatively – especially when the child comes up with a happier ending or 'makes friends' with the nightmare character – can help to defuse the power of the dream.
- Seek professional advice if needed. See your doctor for information and referral.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parent Line Tel. 132 289
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577

Things to remember

- Nightmares can start when the child is about two years old, and reach a peak between the ages of three and six years.
- About one quarter of children have at least one nightmare every week.
- Nightmares usually occur later in the sleep cycle, between 4am and 6am.
- Try to be supportive and understanding.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Newcastle Sleep Disorders Centre

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