

Nightmares

What to do about those scary dreams

You & Your Child

Nightmares can be very real to a child. And almost all children have them.

Children usually begin having nightmares around age 3. But they have most of their nightmares between the ages of 4 and 6 years old.

What brings on nightmares? Usually, they are related to a child's normal worries. Nightmares can also be about things that scare a child, like a fire or a thunderstorm. Sometimes, nightmares happen because of major changes in a child's life, like a new baby brother or sister.

It is difficult for young children to know that a nightmare is "just a dream." It may take them a few years to realize that what happens in a nightmare won't happen during the day, when they are awake.

Nightmares can also be tough on parents. But your child's nightmares will pass in time. With most children, nightmares happen far less often after age 6.

On Back

What to do when you child wakes up from a nightmare.

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What to do about those scary dreams

Go to you child when he or she cries

Just having you near will help calm your child.

Understand and comfort

Nightmares are very real to children. When your child has one, he or she will need your understanding and comfort. If your child wakes up you can:

- Hug or hold your child in your arms.
- Softly assure your child that the nightmare was not real, that it was only a dream, and that everything is okay now.
- Rub your child's back.

Make your child feel safe

Turn on a dim light, but not all of the lights. Tell your child that the bad dream is over and that he or she is safe with you.

You might also point out a few of your child's familiar and favorite things in the room. "I'm right here with you and so is the teddy bear. See your books? See the chair?" Remind your child that these things are real and that things in a dream are not.

If still sleeping, don't wake your child

Children don't always fully wake up after a nightmare. If your child is still sleeping, or half asleep don't wake him or her. Children have a better chance of falling back to sleep if they are not forced to wake up.

Listen caringly if your child wants to talk about the nightmare

- Don't try to convince your child there is nothing to be afraid of. Nightmares are very real to children.
- Tell your child that you know that dreams can be scary. You could say, "Even I have had a scary dream."

Suggest things "to do" in case the dream occurs again

Suggest some creative ways your child can fight off whatever it was that frightened him or her.

If your child had a nightmare about a monster, you might suggest he or she "zap it" if it comes again. Or, if your child was falling, say, "Next time, spread your wings and fly away."

Keep your child in bed

After having a nightmare, your child may want to get up or sleep in your bed.

It is best to try and keep to your regular sleeping practices. If your child sleeps in his or her own bed, then you sit on the bed and comfort and reassure, rather than allowing your child to get up.

Keep to familiar routines

Familiar routines can help your child feel safe enough to go back to sleep.

If your child is awakened by a nightmare, it may be helpful if you go through the bedtime routine again, including a drink of water and going to the bathroom.

Limit the scary stuff

Because nightmares are often the result of fearfulness, stress, and over excitement, there are a few things you can do to help prevent them.

- Limit the amount of scary television shows your child watches, including violent cartoons.
- Have a bedtime routine that calms your child down. Try reading stories together before going to bed.
- If your child had been frightened during the day, try calming and reassuring him or her before going to bed.

