

# CHILDREN'S NIGHTMARES



During childhood, almost all children experience occasional nightmares. They usually begin around the age of two but are most common in children three to six years old. It is not known why children have nightmares, but it is believed that they are related to the normal anxiety and stress that are a part of growing children's lives.

Nightmares take place during light sleep. Many children awaken when they are having a bad dream. They often wake themselves up with their movements or by talking, yelling, or crying, which only adds to the fright. Children who have awakened themselves may be very frightened, and they may be difficult for parents to calm. They may not want to go back to sleep.

Some children have nightmares more often than others. One child may have bad dreams only a few times per year, and another may have them more frequently. In most cases, parents do need to be concerned about their children's frequent nightmares. Nightmares often come in phases, with children having nightmares every night for a week or weeks, and then none at all for weeks or months.

## What to Do

Here are some things parents can do to calm their children when they have nightmares.

**\*Try to prevent them.** Parents should monitor their children's television viewing of shows that are scary and/or violent, especially ones viewed close to bed time.

**\*Be prepared.** Nightmares are inevitable in children. It is a good idea for parents to plan for their occurrence. Parents should make sure they can hear their children if they should cry out during the night. If parents' and children's bedrooms are in different parts of the house, an intercom will help. Parents should make sure any baby sitter who stays with their children will be able to

comfort them should they awaken from a nightmare.

**\*Go to your children.** Parents should get to their children as quickly as they can. Children need their parents' comfort and support.

**\*Stay with your children.** Even at the risk of losing some sleep, it is important that parents stay with their children until they have settled back down. Parents should stay with their children, if they seem to want them to, until they go back to sleep. Sometimes a quiet activity like reading a story will help children settle down and return to sleep.

**\*Reassure your children.** Parents should make sure their children know that they will protect them. Parents should speak to their children in a calm, soothing voice. They should let them know that they will stay with them if they would like. Parents should tell their children that it is safe to go back to sleep.

**\*Stay calm.** It can be very upsetting to parents to be abruptly awakened by their children's screams or cries. However, if parents are upset, no matter how calm they try to act, their children will notice. Children may then be even more upset by their parents'

tension. Parents should try to remain calm so that they can be of support to their children.

**\*Talk about the nightmare.** If their children are old enough to speak, parents can encourage them to talk about their frightening dreams. Many children remember their dreams the next day, so this can probably be done the morning after the nightmare. Parents should encourage their children to think of and discuss ways to overcome the things in the dream that were frightening. Parents can encourage their children to make up a happy ending to the dream. Parents should respect their children's wishes, however, if they do not want to discuss the dream.

### What Not to Do

**\*Don't wake them.** If children cry out but are still asleep when parents go to their room, it's not necessary to wake them. Unless children are extremely upset, it is possible that the nightmare will end and they will return to normal sleep. Parents should just stay with their children until they either wake up or sleep peacefully again.

**\*Don't let children sleep with you.** It is not a good idea for parents to

get into their children's beds or to allow their children into their bed after a nightmare. This might give children the message that they should be afraid of their own beds. This may also turn into a habit that is very difficult to break.

**\*Don't tell children nightmares aren't real.** It will probably not help to tell children that their nightmares were not real, or that it was "just a dream." To children, the nightmare seemed very real, and was very frightening. Instead, parents should try to explain to their children what a dream is and that all people have them.

Nightmares are a normal part of almost all children's lives. The best thing that parents can do to help their children cope with nightmares is to find a way to calm and support them if they're upset by one. However, if parents have any concerns about their children's nightmares, especially if children are having other problems, it is best to consult their children's health care provider.



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