

Nightmares

WHAT ARE NIGHTMARES?

Nightmares are scary dreams that can wake a child leaving her upset and in need of comfort. They are very common in children and often a part of normal development. It is rare to find a child or adolescent who has never experienced a nightmare. After a nightmare, most children are afraid to go back to sleep and often do not want to be left alone. Very young children do not know the difference between a dream and reality. So when they wake up, they may not understand the concept that they were only dreaming and it is now over. They may keep insisting that something scary is about to occur.

Nightmares are most common between the ages of 6 and 10 years, but both younger and older children also experience nightmares. Most children experience nightmares infrequently, but others do on a frequent basis.

Before the age of 12 years, boys and girls are equally likely to have nightmares. After age 12 years, nightmares may be more common in girls.

WHAT DO CHILDREN HAVE NIGHTMARES ABOUT?

Most young children have concerns about being separated from their parents. So they may have a nightmare about being lost or having something happen to one of their parents. Nightmares in older children and adolescents often involve some type of looming harm. Nightmares typically include something that is scary or frightening. But they can also include other negative feelings like embarrassment.

Nightmares also are more likely to happen following some difficult event. For example, if a child has just started school or if her parents have gone away overnight, she is more likely to have a nightmare. For some children, nightmares may also be the reliving of a traumatic event, such as getting lost or getting shots at the doctors. Older children often have nightmares related to scary movies or stories, or a frightening daytime experience.

HOW CAN YOU REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF NIGHTMARES?

There are several things that you can do to help reduce the likelihood of nightmares.

- **Avoid scary stories, television shows, or movies before bedtime:** These will increase the likelihood of your child having a nightmare. Choose instead a comforting bedtime routine.
- **Identify stressors:** If there is something in your child's life that you know is distressing, try to take care of it and reassure your child. If your child suddenly experiences a significant increase in the frequency or intensity of nightmares, try to evaluate why. Look for recurring themes that could give you a clue as to the cause and then deal with the problem.
- **Ensure that your child is getting enough sleep:** Children are much more likely to have nightmares after not getting enough sleep. If your child is having nightmares, make sure that she is getting enough sleep as this can help decrease both the frequency and the intensity of nightmares.

HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD'S NIGHTMARES?

If your child has a nightmare, there are a few things that you can do.

- **Offer reassurance:** The best thing that you can do if your child has a nightmare is comfort her. For young children, merely holding them and providing physical comfort is enough. For older children, reassurance may also be needed. Following most nightmares, your child will be reassured by a few minutes of comfort. Stay with her in her room. Let her know that you are nearby and will make sure that she is safe and secure. Most children are still tired after a nightmare and will be ready to fall back to sleep.
- **Give your child a security object:** Helping a child become attached to a security object that she can keep in bed with her can be beneficial. This often helps a child feel more relaxed throughout the night.
- **Leave a light on:** If your child insists on having a light on, put it on the dimmest setting possible so that your child can fall back to sleep.
- **Discuss it the next day:** The next day, you may want to try and talk to your child about her nightmare to see if there is anything bothering her. Most of the time nightmares are isolated events with little meaning, but if your child starts having them on a frequent basis, you should try and figure out if anything is disturbing her.
- **Draw the nightmare:** Have your child imagine different endings to her nightmare and have her draw the new dream with a good ending. Another way to give your child a sense of control over her nightmares is to have her draw a picture of the bad dream but then crumple up the picture and throw it away.
- **Encourage the use of imagination:** There are other ways to help your child combat a nightmare by having her use her imagination. For example, have your child flip her pillow after a nightmare to “change the channel,” like on a television set. Hang a dream catcher over her bed, which will capture the bad dreams while letting the good dreams through.
- **Get outside help:** If your child's nightmares are severe, meaning that they are interfering in her life or occurring on a very frequent basis, speak to her physician or a mental health provider.