



HIDZZZSLEEP

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Nightmares

What are nightmares?

Nightmares are scary dreams that can wake a child leaving her upset and they are very common in children. It is rare to find someone who has never experienced a nightmare. After a nightmare, most children are afraid to go back to sleep and often do so alone. Very young children do not know the difference between a dream and reality. When they wake up they may not understand the concept that they were only dreaming. They may keep insisting that something scary is still about to occur.

What do children have nightmares about? Most young toddlers have concerns about being separated from their parents. So, they may have a nightmare about being kidnapped or something bad happening to one of their parents. Nightmares also are more likely to happen in response to a traumatic event in the child's life. For example, if a child has just started day care or moved to a new home away overnight, she is more likely to have a nightmare. For young children, nightmares often involve the re-living of a traumatic event, such as getting lost, getting a shot at the doctor, or being barked at by a big dog. By age two, nightmares begin to incorporate monsters. Children under two can hurt them. Older children often have nightmares related to scary movie or television. Nightmares are often related to daytime experience.

What causes nightmares?

Nightmares are usually a part of normal development and are a sign of a young child's imagination. Children are also more likely to have nightmares after a frightening experience.

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

- **Avoid scary things before bedtime.** Don't read scary stories or watch scary movies or television shows immediately before bedtime. Choose instead a comforting bedtime routine.
- **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 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 your child is getting enough sleep.** Children are

much more likely to have nightmares after not getting enough sleep. So, if your child is having nightmares, make sure that is getting enough sleep as this can help decrease the frequency and 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 should do:

- **Reassurance.** The best thing that you can do if your child has a nightmare is to comfort her. For babies and young toddlers, merely holding them and providing physical comfort is enough. For older children, verbal 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.
- **Security object.** Helping a child become attached to a security object that he can keep in bed with him can be beneficial. This often helps a child feel more relaxed throughout the night.
- **Leave a light on.** If your child insists on you putting a light on and leaving it on, that is okay. If you leave it on, put it on the dimmest setting possible so 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 will want to try and figure out what is disturbing your child.
- **Use of imagination.** Some children do well with using their imagination to get rid of nightmares. A child can draw pictures of their bad dreams and throw them away or they can imagine different endings to their nightmares. Even a dream catcher hung over a child's bed can be reassuring.
- **Get outside help.** If your child's nightmares are severe, meaning that they are interfering in your child's life or occur on a very frequent basis, speak to your child's physician or a mental health provider.