

Nightmares

Very young children have nightmares about being separated from their parents. By age 2, they dream about monsters and scary things.

What are nightmares?

Nightmares are scary dreams that can wake a child, leaving them upset and in need of comfort. They are very common in children. It is rare to find someone who has never had 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.

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 lost or having something happen to one of their parents. Nightmares also are more likely to happen following some difficult event in the child's life. For example, if a child has just started day care or if their parents have gone away overnight, they are more likely to have a nightmare. For young children, nightmares may also be the reliving of a traumatic event, such as getting lost, getting a shot at the doctors, or being barked at by a big dog. By age 2 years, nightmares begin to incorporate monsters and scary things that can hurt a child. Older children often have nightmares related to scary movies or stories or a frightening daytime experience.

What causes nightmares?

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

Things you can do to help reduce the likelihood of nightmares in your child:

- **Avoid scary stories, television shows, or movies before bedtime.** These will increase the chance 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 find out 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 they are getting enough sleep as this can help decrease both the frequency and intensity of nightmares.
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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 them. 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 your child in their room. Let them know that you are nearby and will make sure they are 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 they can keep in bed with them 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 their nightmare to see if there is anything bothering them. 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 what is disturbing them.
- **Encourage the use of imagination.** Some children do well with using their imagination to get rid of nightmare. Your child can draw pictures of their bad dreams and then throw them away, or they can imagine different endings to the nightmare. Even a dream catcher hung over their bed may be reassuring.
- **Get outside help.** If your child's nightmares are severe, meaning they are interfering in their life or occurring on a very frequent basis, speak to their healthcare provider or mental health therapist.

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