

Nightmares and Night Terrors



Children sometimes work out confusing or difficult feelings and experiences through their dreams. Adults do this too. Nightmares and night terrors are common at this age. Young children do not yet understand the line between fantasy and reality. This can lead to fears that sometimes get expressed through dreams.

Tips for understanding and responding to nightmares:

- Sometimes children have a hard time making sense of things. For example, you might see an animal at the pet store your child finds frightening. Or you may come across a tractor mowing the lawn at the park. It doesn't seem scary to you, but your child may find it terrifying. Later, these "characters" may find their way into your child's dreams.
- Wonder what might be going on in your child's life that could be causing stress or worries. Changes like the addition of a sibling, a new caregiver, or a move to a new home can bring stress that shows up in nightmares.
- Have your child tell you what happened in the dream and how they felt. Dreams often make no sense, but the feelings are real! Talking about feelings does not increase them. In fact, it may help your child move on. Don't worry if your toddler can't talk much about a dream. Just let them try. You can respond with empathy. That lion in your dream was scary. Good thing that lion isn't near us.
- Try to put your child back to sleep in their own bed. If you let them sleep in your room after a nightmare that could become the new norm. Going back to sleep in their own bed also teaches them that their room is a safe place to sleep.



Tips for understanding and responding to night terrors:

- While nightmares are “bad dreams,” a night terror is when a child is crying or screaming *while they are still asleep*. You can tell your child is having a night terror when they don’t seem to “see” you even with their eyes open.
- Try not to wake your child from a night terror. Waking often causes confusion. They get disoriented and less likely to calm down and fall back to sleep.
- Ensure that your child is physically safe. If they wake up, keep them in their own bed and help them get calm so they can go back to sleep. Some children may flail or even get up and walk around during a night terror.
- Night terrors are more common when a child is overtired. Aim for a consistent bedtime and night time routines.

If your child has frequent nightmares or night terrors, try these tips and check on other factors. Does your child need less television or other screen time before bed? Is their sleeping space safe? Can you think of anything that is upsetting them these days? Though they can be scary, nightmares and night terrors are not usually cause for concern. Most children outgrow them. If you have questions or concerns, talk to your HealthySteps Specialist or pediatric primary care provider for support and guidance.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

