

THE SLEEPING BABY PROJECT

NIGHTMARES?!

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Why they happen

Most kids have nightmares once in a while, but **2- to 4-year-olds** are particularly prone –this is an age when normal fears develop, imagination blossoms, and the ability to describe a bad dream kicks into high gear.

Many things can cause stress – and nightmares – for a 2- to 4-year-old, from toilet training to moving to a big-kid bed, changes in childcare or at preschool, or a parent's layoff from work.

Preschoolers from **5- to 8-year-olds**, with their rapidly expanding grasp of real-life perils (like car accidents, violence, and death), may be especially affected by nightmares.

Nightmares are part of normal development, as children's imaginations develop and children begin to understand that there are things that exist that can hurt them.

Many things can cause stress – and nightmares – for a preschooler, from starting school to changes in childcare, parental divorce, a death in the family ...

Your child's nightmares may stem from listening to a story that's scary (even if it doesn't seem scary to you), watching an upsetting program or movie, getting excited or worked up before bed, or feeling anxious or stressed during the day.

For a child working through her feelings about these stressful events, **nightmares are a normal response**, and you're not a bad parent if your child has them.



How to know if it's a nightmare

If your child wakes up crying or fearful and has trouble getting back to sleep, chances are she's had a nightmare. These scary episodes usually happen during the second half of the night, when dreaming is most likely to occur. Your child will probably remember her bad dream the next day and may continue to be bothered by it.

Nightmares shouldn't be confused with **night terrors**, a less common sleep disturbance that usually strikes during the first third of the night. Children having a night terror episode remain fast asleep throughout, in a deep, nondreaming state, yet they're extremely agitated and hard to console. Afterwards, they go back to snoozing soundly and won't remember the incident in the morning.

Preventing nightmares

First, minimize overall stress by making sure your child gets enough sleep.

A relaxing and predictable bedtime routine can help ward off nightmares – try a warm bath, an uplifting story, a song, and end with a night-light. You can also read books that talk about bedtime fears, such as *There are Monsters in My Room*, by Michael and Rachel Yu or *Bye-Bye Bad Dreams*, by Stephanie L. Robinson.

Teaching nightmare-coping skills can also help.

A scared child needs comfort from you. As children get older, they'll get better at understanding that a dream is just a dream.

How to help your child after a nightmare

Go to your child when she cries out. Physical reassurance is important, so hug her or rub her back until she calms down. If you bring her into your bed to comfort her, be aware you could be creating a habit that's hard to reverse.

Let her tell you about the nightmare if she wants to, but don't press it. At this age she understands the difference between reality and fantasy, so you can console her by reminding her it was "only a dream." But be patient if she's still upset – we all know the emotions conjured up by a nightmare are very real.

You may also want to show your child there are no monsters under the bed or hiding in the closet. Be nonchalant about it to avoid getting drawn into an all-the-lights-on monster-hunt extravaganza. Double-check that your child's favorite toy or stuffed animal is tucked in with her, make sure the night-light is on, and remind her you're right down the hall, ready to assure that everyone in the house is safe.



What should I do if my child says he or she is too scared to go to sleep?

Your child is going to need reassurance after having a nightmare. This is especially the case with younger children. As your child gets older, though, you will want to start teaching him coping skills that he can use when he is anxious or scared

Teach coping skills.

Teach your child coping skills and discuss alternative ways to respond, such as "being brave" and thinking positive thoughts. You could talk about how you deal with something that you are afraid of. Also, provide examples of coping role models by reading stories about children who are afraid and conquer their fears.

Stalling tactic

Some children learn that saying they are afraid is an effective stalling tactic or a way to avoid bedtime. On the other hand, some children and adolescents with sleep issues really have an anxiety disorder; these are generally children who also worry a lot during the day or have things that they are anxious about or avoid.

Listen and understand. Try to understand your child's fears. Don't dismiss or make fun of them.

Reassurance. It is important to reassure your child if he is afraid.

Communicate the idea of safety over and over again.

Set limits.

At the same time that you are reassuring your child, you do need to set limits. Setting limits is necessary to prevent your child's "being scared" behavior from being reinforced. Also encourage appropriate behavior, such as remind your child "Remember, no crying and no calling at bedtime."

Have fun in the dark. Make being in the dark fun. Play flashlight tag. Have a treasure hunt and search for things that glow in the dark.

Use your imagination and be creative. Use your imagination to fight imaginary fears, like monsters. Many families have found “monster spray” to be a wonderful way to help a child cope with bedtime fears. Some children are comforted by having a pet nearby for nighttime company (even a bedside fish tank may help). Whenever possible, have your child be actively involved in coming up with solutions to help him gain a sense of mastery and control.

Security object. Help your child become attached to a security object that he can keep in bed with him. This can help your child feel more relaxed at bedtime and throughout the night.

Another thing to try is leaving the bedroom door open so that your child doesn't feel isolated from the rest of the family.

Avoid scary television shows. Keep your child away from scary TV shows, videos or stories that may add to his fears.

Relaxation training. Teach your child relaxation strategies to help him relax at bedtime and fall asleep. For example, have your child imagine a relaxing scene, such as lying on the beach or watching a sunset. This will give him something else to think about while lying in bed and help distract him from his fearful thoughts. Also, it is physically impossible to be relaxed and scared at the same time.

Discuss your child's fears during the day. Talk to your child about his fears during the day and how he can be less frightened at night. Additionally, build your child's self-confidence during the day. If he feels secure during the day, this can help him feel more secure at night, too.

Have him stay in his bed. Don't encourage your child to get out of bed. He should stay in bed and find out for himself that he really is safe so that he can learn to overcome his fears. It is much better for you to stay with him in his room than it is for him to join you. If your child is too frightened to stay in his room alone, it is okay to occasionally stay with him until he falls asleep. **Don't do this too frequently,** or even two nights in a row, as he may come to depend on your presence. If your child gets up in the middle of the night and comes into your room, it is better to take him right back and gently tuck him into bed.

Check on him. If your child is anxious about you leaving, check on him frequently. It is better to check on him on a predictable schedule, every 5 or 10 minutes, so that your coming and reassuring him is not based on him crying or calling out for you.

Star system. Some children get reinforced for being scared at night by getting lots of attention for being afraid. If this is the case, switch the scenario. Tell him how proud you are of him for being brave. Set up a star system so he can earn stars for being brave and sleeping on his own. After earning a certain number of stars, he can turn them in for a treat, such as watching a favorite video, going to the park, or baking chocolate chip cookies.

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