

## Nightmares and Night Terrors

*It can be difficult for parents to know what to do when they find their preschooler upset after a nightmare or thrashing around during night terrors. Parents can become anxious and worry about their child. This tip sheet explains what nightmares and night terrors are and gives some suggestions to help you teach your child to settle after waking during the night.*

### WHAT ARE NIGHTMARES?

Nightmares are bad dreams that generally occur towards morning. Children often wake after a nightmare feeling scared and upset. Nightmares may occur because of upsetting events during the day or for no obvious reason.

Nightmares are most common in children between 3 and 5 years of age. Over one third of preschoolers have a nightmare at least once every 2 weeks. After waking from a nightmare, children often settle as soon as a parent appears.

It may be a sign of stress or emotional upset if your child has the same nightmare over and over. During the day, talk to your child about what is worrying them. If you are unable to work through the problem with your child, seek professional help.

### WHAT ARE NIGHT TERRORS?

Night terrors are far less common than nightmares. They usually happen in the first few hours after falling asleep, during deep, non-dreaming sleep. Night terrors may occur after a child has had a high fever or after a busy or stressful day. They mostly occur in the older toddler and preschool years. It may look as if the child is reacting to a terrifying nightmare, but they are not dreaming, nor are they suffering any distress. Although their eyes may be open and they may speak or call out, they are actually still asleep. They are not aware of what is happening around them and will not respond to comforting. During night terrors, children may struggle or push away

anyone trying to hold them. Night terrors are usually over quickly, but can last up to 20 minutes. It is difficult to wake a child during night terrors. When they wake in the morning, children do not remember having night terrors.

Night terrors may involve:

- Loud, panic-stricken screaming.
- Out of control thrashing of arms and legs.
- Rapid heartbeat.
- Rapid breathing.
- Sweating.
- A glassy stare.

This can be very frightening for parents to watch. Although night terrors are not common, it is good for parents to know what night terrors are so they do not worry if they find their child in this state. It is also important to be able to tell the difference between nightmares and night terrors because they are

managed quite differently. There is very little that parents can do for their child except wait until the night terrors are over. If your child has more than one episode of night terrors in a 4-month period, seek professional help.

### HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD SETTLE AT BEDTIME

#### ▼ Help Your Child Feel Safe

If your child is afraid of going to sleep because they have been frightened by a nightmare, they may develop sleeping problems. Help them to feel comfortable and safe in their bedroom. If possible, have a night light in the bedroom or leave a hallway light on. Your child may like to have some music playing softly, special bedclothes or favourite pictures on the wall.

#### ▼ Develop a Bedtime Routine

To help children feel secure, develop a good bedtime routine. For example, put toys away, clean teeth, go to the toilet, read a story, kiss and say goodnight. Before bed, try to calm your child with quiet, relaxing activities rather than exciting them with loud, active play. Avoid scary stories and television shows just before bed. For more information on how to establish a good bedtime routine, see the *Bedtime* tip sheet in this series.

### HOW TO MANAGE NIGHTMARES

#### ▼ Reassure Your Child

If your child is awake and frightened, tell them they are safe. Be supportive — you may like to hold your child close to you to comfort them. Firmly and



confidently reassure your child that nothing bad will happen.

Explain that things that happen in nightmares cannot really hurt. The dream may have seemed real to your child so do not insist that it was not real. Reassure your child that they are safe because you are close and will take care of them.

Do not go to the other extreme and talk about fantasy characters as though they are real. For example, if your child is frightened that there is a monster in the bedroom, do not say the monster has gone or pretend to chase it away. If you pretend that the monster is real, your child may worry it will come back when you have gone.

#### ▼ Listen To Your Child

Sometimes when a child wakes after a nightmare, they want to talk about their dream or fear. If so, calmly listen to your child and do not look worried.

#### ▼ Help Your Child Relax

To help your child go back to sleep, encourage them to calm down and relax. You can show them how to relax by taking some deep breaths and going floppy like a rag doll. Although lying down with your child may help them get back to sleep, do not do this too often as it can lead to more sleep disruptions and fears in the future.

#### ▼ Leave a Light On

If you leave a night light on, your child can quickly work out where they are when they wake from a nightmare. This can make it easier for them to accept that a dream is over and they are safe in their bed. Your child may even want a brighter light left on after a nightmare.

### HOW TO MANAGE NIGHT TERRORS

#### ▼ Let Your Child Sleep

While your child is having night terrors, they are in a deep sleep. Do not try to wake them as this will only frighten your child. Children will generally settle without waking after night terrors. The best approach is to let the night terrors pass. Stay close and only offer comfort if your child asks for help. If you feel you must hold your child

*FOR FURTHER HELP* See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

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to keep them safe, be gentle and let your child go if they try to break free.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

It will help your child to settle if you remain calm. To encourage good sleeping habits, praise your child for sleeping through the night and settling by themselves after waking. Unless your child says something the next day, do not talk about their nightmare or night terrors. Most preschoolers will not remember, so do not worry them by talking about it. If your child wants to talk about their nightmare, calmly listen to them. Reassure your child that they are safe and cannot be hurt by things that happen in nightmares.

### KEY STEPS

- Help your child feel safe in their bedroom.
- Establish a good bedtime routine.
- Do not wake your child when they are sleeping even if they appear to be upset.
- Reassure your child that they are safe.
- Listen to your child if they want to tell you what frightened them.
- Help your child calm down and relax.
- Praise your child for sleeping through the night or settling after waking.
- Do not mention the incident the next day unless your child wants to talk about it.