

## NIGHTMARES AND NIGHT TERRORS

### NIGHTMARES

Nightmares are scary dreams that awaken a child. Everyone dreams four or five times each night. Some dreams are good, some are bad. Dreams help the mind process complicated events or information. Occasional nightmares occur in all children over six months of age. Usually the child awakens and looks for comfort from a parent. The content of nightmares usually relates to developmental challenges: toddlers may have nightmares about separation from their parents; preschoolers about monsters or the dark; and school-age children, about death or real dangers. Violent TV shows or movies may cause frequent nightmares.

### Dealing with Nightmares

- Reassure and cuddle your child. Explain to her that she was having a bad dream. Sit on the bed until your child is calm. Offer to leave the bedroom door open (never close the door on a fearful child). Provide a night-light, especially if your child has fears of the dark. Most children return to sleep fairly quickly.
- Help your child talk about the bad dreams during the next day. Your child may not remember what the dream was about unless you can remind him of something he said about it when he woke up. If your child was dreaming about falling or being chased, reassure him that lots of children dream about that. If your child has the same bad dream over and over again, help him imagine a good ending to the bad dream. Encourage your child to use a strong person or a magic weapon to help him overcome the bad person or event in the dream. You may want to help your child draw pictures or write stories about the new happier ending for the dream. Working through a bad dream often takes several conversations about it.
- Protect your child against frightening movies and TV shows. Even the evening news can be frightening for children. For many children, violent or horror movies cause bedtime fears and nightmares. These fears can persist for months or years. Absolutely forbid these movies before 13 years of age. Between 13 and 17 years, the maturity and sensitivity of your child must be considered carefully in deciding when he is ready to deal with R-rated movies. Be vigilant about slumber parties or Halloween parties. Tell your child to call you if the family he is visiting is showing scary movies.

### NIGHT TERRORS

Night terrors are sleep events characterized by apparent fright and agitation. The child is not comforted by the presence of the parent and may not seem to realize the parent is there. The episode usually begins within two hours of bedtime and lasts 10 to 30 minutes. Night terrors occur in 2% of children between 1 and 8 years old and tend to run in families. They are not caused by psychological stress but can be brought on by getting overtired, so naps and a reasonable bedtime are important. While night terrors can be frightening they are harmless and end on their own. The child has no memory of the event the next day.

## **Dealing with Night Terrors**

Try to help your child return to normal sleep. Your goal is to help your child go from agitated sleep to a calm sleep. Your child will be difficult to awaken, so don't try. Turn on the lights so that your child is less confused by shadows. Make soothing comments such as, "You are all right. You are home in your own bed. You can rest now." Speak slowly and repetitively. Such comments are usually better than silence. Hold your child only if it seems to help him or her feel better. There is no way to abruptly shorten the episode. Shaking or shouting at your child will just cause the child to become more agitated and will prolong the attack.

- Protect your child against injury. During a night terror, a child can fall down a stairway, run into a wall, or break a window. Try to gently direct your child back to bed.
- Prepare babysitters or overnight leaders for these episodes. Explain to people who care for your child what a night terror is and what to do if one happens. Understanding this will prevent them from overreacting if your child has a night terror.
- Try to prevent night terrors with prompted awakenings. For several nights, note how many minutes elapse from the time your child falls asleep to the onset of the night terror. Then begin awakening your child every night 15 minutes before the expected time of the night terror. Keep your child fully awake and out of bed for 5 minutes. Continue these prompted awakenings for seven consecutive nights. If the night terrors return when you stop awakening your child, repeat this seven-night program.

## **Suggested Reading:**

Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems by Richard Ferber, M.D.

A Guide to Your Child's Sleep by George Cohen