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children and nightmares

Most children experience nightmares from time to time. Frightening dreams can start when the child is about two years old, and reach a peak between the ages of three and six years. Nightmares are bad dreams that can cause children to wake in fear and distress. Your child might have nightmares about a realistic danger, such as aggressive dogs, sharks or spiders or imaginary fears, such as monsters.

Depending on their language ability, children can often recall the content of a bad dream in detail. Some younger children might find it difficult to get back to sleep following a nightmare. Children often wake tearful and upset after a nightmare and will want comfort from you. As children get older, they will get better at understanding that a dream is just a dream. By seven, your child might be able to deal with nightmares without calling you for comfort.

The occasional nightmare is not a sign of emotional disturbance and need not be cause for concern. In fact, nightmares are often the product of a vivid imagination. But if your child is dreaming about the same or similar things over and over again (a recurrent nightmare), or the content of the dream is particularly disturbing, he might be experiencing some kind of stress during the day.

The cause of nightmares isn't known, but it is thought to be the ordinary stresses and strains of growing up. Children who have experienced a traumatic event, for example, tend to have frequent nightmares for the next six months or so.

A range of possible causes

Some of the possible causes of nightmares include:

- A traumatic event, such as an accident or surgery
- The ordinary stresses and strains of growing up
- Fever
- An active imagination.
- TV, media, overstimulation

Coping with your child's nightmare

Suggestions include: Go to your child as soon as you can. If your child's bedroom is far from yours and you can't be sure to hear them when they call or cry, consider installing a baby monitor.

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Coping with your child's nightmare

- Cuddle and reassure your child. Talk calmly and gently.
- Appreciate that your child's feelings are genuine.
- Be prepared to stay with them until they have calmed down. If your child is particularly frightened, you may need to soothe them with a favourite (but relaxing) activity, such as reading a book together.
- Your child may want to talk to you about their nightmare. Encourage them to come up with alternate endings for the nightmare that are happy or funny.

Prevention suggestions

It isn't possible to stop your child from ever having another nightmare, but you may be able to reduce the frequency of bad dreams. Suggestions include:

- Make sure your child doesn't watch frightening shows on television, or read scary books.
- Consider your child's daily routine. Is anything troubling them? Stressful events that could trigger a spate of nightmares include a new sibling, moving house or starting school.
- Talk about dreams together, and explain that everyone has dreams and occasional nightmares.
- If your child is troubled by a recurring nightmare, help them to explore its meaning through drawing, writing or play acting. Thinking about the nightmare creatively - especially when the child comes up with a happier ending or 'makes friends' with the nightmare character - can help

Seek professional advice if needed. See your doctor for information and referral.

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Tweddle Child + Family Health Service 53 Adelaide Street Footscray Victoria 3018