

TIP SHEET: Nightmares and Night Terrors

Ages Affected: 3–5 years old

What are nightmares?

Nightmares are scary dreams. Most children have them from time to time. Most nightmares happen very late in the sleep period (usually between 4 a.m. and 6 a.m.). Your child may wake up and come to you for comfort. Usually, she will be able to tell you what happened in the dream and why it was scary. Your child may have trouble going back to sleep. Your child might have the same dream again on other nights.

What are night terrors?

Some children have a different kind of scary dream called a “night terror.” Night terrors happen during deep sleep (usually between 1 a.m. and 3 a.m.). A child having a night terror will often wake up screaming. She may be sweating and breathing fast. Your child’s pupils (the black center of the eye) may look larger than normal. At this point, your child may still be asleep, with open eyes. She will be confused and might not answer when you ask what’s wrong. Your child may be difficult to wake. When your child wakes, she usually won’t remember what happened. Children who have night terrors may also sleepwalk.

No parent wants to see their child in such distress; here are some tips to help your child deal with their fears and overcome nightmares/night terrors:

- Avoid scary stories, movies, or other stimuli just before bed. Our brains have a tendency to recall the last thing on our mind before we go to sleep, so make sure that the last things that your child experiences or sees before going to sleep are pleasant, happy, and relaxing.
- Talk gently with your child before he goes to sleep, otherwise sing a song or tell a short story, because your child finds your voice very soothing. This routine helps very much after the child wakes up.
- Use a nightlight. This will calm and comfort your child while falling asleep. Make sure the light is not too bright. Bright light can actually interrupt sleep patterns and contribute to nightmares.
- After your child has a nightmare, have her explain it to you. Then walk her through it and help her understand that it’s not real. Also, help her come up with a happy or funny alternative. For example, “Every time you see the monster in your dreams, imagine that he has the hiccups.”
- Sleepwalking can be dangerous. Use toddler gates on staircases and don’t use bunk beds for children who often have nightmares or night terrors.
- When your child wakes you in the middle of the night, it is important to remain calm. If you become anxious or stressed, your child will also sense that, and it will make it more difficult to get her to settle down again.
- Stay with your child until he goes back to sleep peacefully.
- Reassure your child that it was just a dream and that she is safe.
- Establish a regular sleep schedule for your child and make sure he is getting enough sleep. This will also help your child to perform better in school or daytime activities.
- Praise your child for sleeping through the night.