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Nightmares: Why they happen and what to do about them

Last updated: July 2006

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By the ParentCenter editorial staff

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 he's had a nightmare. These scary episodes usually take place during the second half of the night, when dreaming is most likely to occur. Your child may remember his 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 don't remember the incident in the morning.

Why nightmares 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.

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 TV show or movie](#), getting excited or worked up before bed, or feeling [anxious](#) or stressed during the day.

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

How to help your child after a nightmare

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

Let him tell you about the nightmare if he wants to, but don't press it. Console him verbally, but remember that "it's only a dream" might not be much help, as your child is just beginning to understand the difference between reality and fantasy. But it's still something worth saying, since children this age are ready to start learning that nightmares aren't 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 him, make sure the night-light is on, and remind him you're right down the hall, ready to assure that everyone in the house is safe.

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Preventing nightmares

It's certainly not foolproof, but a peaceful bedtime routine — a warm bath, an upbeat story, a song, and a night-light — can help ward off nightmares. Try reading bedtime books that discuss dreams and sleeping, such as Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, Russell Hoban's *Bedtime for Frances*, or Ken Baker's *Brave Little Monster*. And you can minimize overall stress by making sure your child is getting enough sleep.

Sometimes 2- to 4-year-olds feel better if they attempt to take control of a scary situation. Though [not all kids are comforted by methods like these](#), here are a few nighttime tricks to try:

- Help your child make a Native American [dreamcatcher](#) out of pipe cleaners or draw one on construction paper, and hang it over the bed to snare bad dreams and let only the good ones through.

- Let him rub a little skin lotion or face cream — you might call it "good dream cream" — on his tummy or forehead before turning in for the night.
- Fill a spray bottle with water scented with a couple drops of vanilla extract ("monster spray" or "nightmare repellent") and let your child banish scary dreams by spritzing a little around his room before bed.

If you suspect anxiety or stress is behind the bad dreams, try talking to your child about what might be bothering him during the calmer daylight hours. If the nightmares persist and he's extremely afraid of going to bed or fearful during the day, bring it up with his doctor — the dreams could signal an emotional issue that needs addressing.

This article was reviewed by pediatric sleep expert Judy Owens.

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