

COPING WITH NIGHTMARES

By Dr. Kate Aubrey, Registered Psychologist



Nightmares are bad dreams that generally occur towards morning. They are most common in children between three and five years of age. Twenty to 30% of children between the ages of 5 and 12 have frequent nightmares. The fact that a child is having frequent nightmares does not usually indicate that they have an underlying psychological problem - but nightmares can be related to stress or frightening daytime events.

While parents can't prevent nightmares, you can help fight the monster under the bed, **here's how:**

Set the stage for sleep

Children who go to bed too late are more likely to have nightmares. School-age kids need ten to 11 hours of sleep.

Empower your child

Help your child re-create a different or funny ending to the nightmare. Your child can draw pictures of their bad dreams and then throw them away. They can imagine their favourite colour as a big cloud pushing away the nightmare.

Be understanding & offer reassurance

If your child has a bad dream, it's natural to tell her, "It's not real—go back to sleep," But to her, it seems very real. Soothe your child and validate how she feels. You might say, "I can imagine that would be really scary, but there's no monster in your closet."

Create cozy comforts

Helping a child become attached to a security object that he can keep in bed can be beneficial. You can also spritz his room with "sweet dreams" spray, and use the same comforting words when you tuck him in each night.

Teach deep breathing

A calm body has an easier time falling and staying asleep. Teach your child "belly breathing" by having them inhale and fill up their stomach with air like a balloon and exhale to deflate the balloon.

Squash the scary stuff

Play flashlight tag or make shadow puppets so the dark doesn't seem so scary. Put up glow in the dark stickers, get a cool night light, and invest in a noise machine that plays relaxing sounds. Avoid scary videos and stories before bed.

Sources:

Mindell J & Owens J (2003). *A Clinical Guide to Pediatric Sleep; 4 Steps To Reduce Nightmares* www.healthfeed.uofhealth.org

