



night frights

Kids of all ages get scared by bad dreams, but you can help your child learn to sleep soundly again.

by DIANE DEBROVNER

A young child with wild, messy red hair is lying in bed, looking surprised or scared. The child is wearing yellow pajamas with a white floral pattern and is partially covered by a white blanket. The background shows a yellow pillow and a wooden headboard.

Mommyyy!!!

FOR MONTHS, my 10-year-old, Jane, had nightmares nearly every night. She'd wake up screaming for me, I'd run to her room, and she'd beg me to stay with her because she was too frightened to be alone. Wasn't she too old for this?

Most of her nightmares were about scary dolls. She'd seen a commercial on the Disney Channel for a movie about a creepy doll—reminiscent of Chucky—and couldn't get the image out of her mind. Whenever Jane woke up from a nightmare, she'd see her American Girl doll and get even more scared. Then she'd hear noises and worry that robbers were breaking into our apartment.

Every time, I would reassure her that her bad dreams weren't real, but they kept happening. Needless to say, we were both exhausted. At bedtime,

she'd always say, "Dolls are fake and no one's here, right?" and insist that I respond, "Dolls are fake and no one's here." My heart was breaking for her. As far as I could tell, she was a happy, well-adjusted kid, with no major source of stress. Was she suffering from underlying anxiety?

As an editor at *Parents*, I'm lucky to have access to some of the country's top experts. So I set out to figure out what was going on.

➔ Dark thoughts

To my surprise, Jane wasn't too old to be having frequent nightmares. In fact, they're most common in kids ages 6 to 10. While preschoolers have an active imagination and worry about monsters under their bed, older children incorporate real-life fears—such as being

kidnapped or shot—into their dreams, says *Parents* advisor Jodi Mindell, Ph.D., associate director of the Sleep Center at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. One study by Dutch researchers found that 96 percent of 7- to 9-year-olds reported having nightmares, as compared with 68 percent of 4- to 6-year-olds and 76 percent of 10- to 12-year-olds: Nearly 70 percent of the kids said that their dreams were about something they'd seen on TV.

Nightmares happen during REM sleep, and many kids don't wake up after them. However, the dreams can rouse a child in part because they trigger the body's fight-or-flight response that elevates heart rate. Any source of stress—even being overtired—can increase the risk of nightmares. So bad dreams can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: Stressing out about whether you're going to have a nightmare makes you more likely to have one.

When a child wakes up feeling afraid, his house can seem scary and that can make it even tougher for him to fall back to sleep alone, says psychologist Dawn Huebner, Ph.D., author of *What to Do When You Dread Your Bed*, a children's book that was eventually helpful to Jane. A child may have a hard time distinguishing between dreams and reality, and resist trying to fall asleep because he thinks he'll go back into the bad dream.

"The function of dreams seems to be to make sense of our experiences during the day," says Dr. Huebner. If your child has a bad dream now and then, he's just working through something, and it's part of normal developmental anxiety. But if he's having nightmares more days than not for several weeks, think about possible sources of stress at home or at school that you could help him address. Then follow these steps to help him develop the skills he needs to fall asleep on his own.



➔ **Be understanding.**

If your child has a bad dream, it's natural to tell her, "It's not real—go back to bed," says psychiatrist Robin Berman, M.D., a *Parents* advisor and author of *Permission to Parent*. "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 bad guy in your room."

➔ **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. Electronics—which inhibit production of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin—should be turned off a half hour before bedtime, when it's best to do a calm activity such as playing a board game, taking a bath, or going outside to look at the stars, suggests Dr. Huebner.

➔ **Practice relaxing.**

A calm body and mind have an easier time falling and staying asleep. Jane learned how to do "circle breathing," a technique in Dr. Huebner's book. You imagine your breath is traveling in through your right nostril and out of the left nostril. The next breath goes in through the left nostril and out the right. Go back and forth, as if you're breathing in a circle.

Having a new stuffed animal may help your child feel safer in bed. A study of Israeli children during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War by researchers at Tel Aviv University found that children who were given a "Huggy Puppy" had fewer nightmares and other stress-related symptoms than kids put on a waiting list. The children were either told that they should protect the puppy or that the puppy would protect them.

➔ **Don't avoid what's scary.**

When Jane was terrified of her American Girl doll, she asked me to turn its face around—and I did. But



is it a night terror?

Be on the lookout for this other type of sleep disruption, which is most common in toddlers and preschoolers. A night terror may seem like a particularly dramatic nightmare—your child might cry, scream, thrash around, and even run through the house—but he won't call for you the way he might after a nightmare. In fact, he isn't fully awake and he won't remember anything the next morning. However, night terrors are freaky to watch: "If the child is more upset, it's a nightmare; if the parent is more upset, it's a night terror," says Dr. Jodi Mindell.

Night terrors usually occur an hour or two after a child goes to bed. If you try to calm your child when she's having a night terror—which can last ten long minutes—she'll become more upset but won't actually wake up. "Just stand there, make sure she's safe, and let it run its course," says Dr. Mindell. Night terrors are more likely to happen when a child is overtired, anxious, or suffering from sleep-disordered breathing. If your child has a night terror, especially if she snores, consult your pediatrician. When kids have frequent night terrors, a treatment called "scheduled awakenings"—in which you wake your child up a half hour before you expect her to have a night terror—can have a lasting positive effect.

that was a mistake; turns out, I was just confirming for her that the doll was indeed frightening. Instead of shielding your child, help her gradually learn to tolerate whatever she's afraid of. The point is, the more she thinks about or sees the thing that scares her, the less scary it will become. Dr. Huebner suggests explaining that it's like chewing a piece of gum: At first, the flavor is very strong, but if you keep chewing it the flavor disappears.

Spend 15 minutes a day focusing on dolls, dogs, or whatever her nightmare theme is. She could print out a picture of a doll and cut it into a puzzle, have a tea party with her dolls, and read books about dolls. That said, you shouldn't expose your child to new images that could frighten her (and definitely not in the evening). Having CNN or a violent movie on can affect your child even if you don't think she's watching.

➔ **Retrain your child's brain.**

Bad dreams can simply become his mind's bad habit. After a nightmare or at bedtime, he should think about something happy and fun. "He can imagine that he's changing the channel away from his scary thoughts," says Dr. Huebner.

You can also help him learn to distinguish between fantasy and reality and approach the issue in a

more logical way. If you look under the bed and say, "There are no monsters under here," you can actually make your child even more sure that they're real, says Dr. Berman. Instead, take out the calculator and count the total number of nights he's slept in his house, and then ask him, "How many times has a robber broken in?" If he's afraid of something like an earthquake or a fire, you can help him focus on solutions. Practice your family's fire escape plan, for example, and change the batteries in the smoke alarms together.

The next step is to encourage him to come up with a new ending to his bad dream that's silly, magical, or empowering. "Just thinking about the revised dream will make him less likely to have the nightmare," says Dr. Huebner. Perhaps the bad guy falls into a bathtub full of spaghetti or your child pushes the monster off

a cliff. Jane decided that the scary doll in her dream would turn into chocolate and she'd eat it.

➔ **Consider outside help.**

If none of these strategies work after a few weeks—or your child's nightmares are making her scared during the day and interfering with her normal life—she could benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy. "In a few sessions, a child can learn techniques that turn things around dramatically, and she'll feel strong," says Dr. Huebner. "The anxiety resolves, and therapy turns out to be a positive thing rather than a stigma."

Sometimes there is no easy solution to bad dreams, and a child will just grow out of them, says Dr. Berman. That's what happened with one of her sons. "Nightmares often come out of nowhere, but they can go away out of nowhere too." ✖