

Nightmares versus Night Terrors

Whether children experience nightmares or night terrors, both can cause alarm, not only for the child involved but also the adults who are trying to support children through these episodes. Before delving into the key differences between nightmares and night terrors, it is important to establish that nightmares are a common occurrence for young children, particularly as they enter a phase of development where their imagination is developing and less able to establish clear boundaries between fantasy and reality.

The reason why human beings dream is still a mystery, although several theories exist, most of which support the idea that it is the brain's way of processing the experiences we have encountered, the emotions we have felt or the things we have been challenged by. Either way, given that the brain processes around 11 million bits per second (in other words, a range of information received via our senses such as sounds, tastes, smells, touch, internal sensations etc.) it is little wonder that the brain needs an opportunity to process and possibly (as suggested in reverse learning theory) flush out any unnecessary information it has no use for. One such consequence of this phenomenon is dreaming, whether it is enjoyable or less so.

Normalising nightmares

It seems strange to advocate the idea of normalising something that might be quite terrifying for a child (and/or parents) experiencing the aftermath of a nightmare. But like all things in life, if things that are a common occurrence (to a large portion of people) are not normalised, there is a risk of amplifying the situation. For this reason, when children experience nightmares, one way to approach the child after waking from a nightmare is by not making a fuss over them. Not making a fuss over them does not mean ignoring the child and telling them to go back to sleep and leaving them to their own devices but rather to make comments like "they scare me too when I have them". When children are able to learn that they are not alone in their experience of nightmares, it provides an avenue upon which they can see others model their ability to handle and get through a frightening night without fretting about the one that awaits them on the other side of the next day.

Although well-meaning, adults that question children about the specifics of a nightmare (e.g. the details, the feelings, the reasons why etc.) will achieve little more than spiking an already overactive imagination and drag such worrying thoughts and images from their slumbering world into their waking one, thus potentially creating a fixation on the scary things they recall and making them seem like they are with them at all times of the day.

While recalling dreams and analysing them might be a therapeutic technique used by some professionals, it is best to leave that type of technique to those with specific training as dream analysis is not as black and white as attaching meaning to the exact script of the dream. Even on occasions when people have experienced benefits from breaking down their dreams, chances are that person has had cognitive capabilities greater than a young child.

What are night terrors

Night terrors, unlike nightmares, are occurrences that often happen not long after a child has fallen asleep (typically within one to three hours). Nightmares, on the other hand, often occur much later in the evening, usually in the early hours of the morning. Furthermore, nightmares will wake a child from their sleep, causing them to be alert and lucid in their description of what happened and why they might not want to go back to sleep or turn the lights off. Night terrors are at the opposite end of the spectrum. Instead of waking, the child will display intense fear, but they will not appear coherent (i.e. their eyes may be open but they will remain unresponsive to comfort or conversation attempts). In addition, they will not have a recollection of what occurred when they wake the following day. While, like nightmares, no one is certain of the causes of night terrors, evidence suggests poor sleep routines that deprive children of the necessary hours of sleep (see the table at the end of this article for recommended sleep times) and illness such as high temperatures may influence the likelihood of night terrors occurring.

Dealing with nightmares versus dealing with night terrors

In some ways, it can be harder for the adult helping the child who is overcoming nightmares or night terrors than it can be for the child. This statement is made not with the intention of lessening the validation children need during these

times but rather because the adults in a child's life want nothing more than to remove anything that causes their child/children distress. Knowing that there is little more to do than offer support to a child can make any adult feel helpless. While it may not be possible to remove nightmares or night terrors from a child's life in a quick-fix way, there are certainly things that can be done to support children. The following will explore each type of experience, first starting with nightmares.

As explained previously, nightmares tend to occur in the early hours of the morning. The reason for this is because children are in the sleep phase of rapid eye movement (REM). REM sleep occurs multiple times throughout the night and it is not uncommon for people to lightly rouse between sleep cycles. Because the REM cycle is one of the easiest times to wake up, this is why children can wake and relay their dreams in detail. Should this occur, the following steps might help the child manage left over emotions and memories of the event before trying to go back to sleep:

1. *Validate the child's feelings* – validating the child's feelings does not mean entering into a long dialogue that asks the child to talk as much as they can about the details of their dream. If they need to do a verbal dump, allow them, but be wary of entering into a conversation. Simply nodding and making small comments like, "That would be scary," or "I'd be scared too if I dreamt that" should be enough to support the child and help them to feel heard.
2. *Avoid question time* – As tempting as it might be, avoid asking children questions about their dreams. Asking questions about dreams will do little more than provoke additional unwanted feelings and worries and prevent children from wanting to go back to sleep.
3. *Create a back-to-bed ritual* – This task will be the most difficult to achieve, mainly because we can never predict just how strong the emotions associated with a dream will be. Nevertheless, research has proven that children learn to manage their lives and negative feelings/experiences best when a ritual is established. For example, children who are not fond of separating from parents will do consistently better when a routine is established and stuck to, even if there are a few hiccups and objections along the way. With this information in mind, create a back-to-sleep ritual/routine that is stuck to. It will need to be one that has a time limit attached to it, otherwise children will learn that the boundaries can be blurred. A back-to-bed routine might involve using one or two strategies that you have worked on during waking hours (see below for suggestions), before the adult gives the child a kiss good-night, turns on a night light and, taking a stoic breath, leaves without a backward glance.
4. *Educating the child during waking hours* – Helping children to tell fact from fiction can sometimes be a useful strategy; however, it may be less successful for some children as their age and developmental capacity will influence the outcome of our efforts to educate them. Nevertheless, if a child starts talking about the dreams during waking hours, a little age-appropriate psychoeducation might help them. For example, "Did you know that your dreams happen because your brain likes to make things up?" (NOTE: We, as adults, know that this statement is not completely accurate as no-one knows why our brain engages in dream making; however, simplifying the truth helps normalise something that happens to millions of children (and adults) worldwide.)
5. *Developing strategies that can be used during the back-to-sleep ritual* – there are many possible strategies that can be used to support children. Not all will resonate with every child; therefore, the following suggestions are not exhaustive.
 - a. *Power song* - Learn a power song and get the child to sing it to themselves (NOTE: Avoid having the adult sing to the child otherwise the child will rely on the parent being there to use this strategy). An example of this for me when I was a small child was to use the theme tune to *The Smurfs*. For me, this tune was a happy one that I would hum away. The reason this song worked for me was because I was able to tell myself that the Smurfs always won and everything always turned out alright in the end. Your child might have a similar affiliation with a similar song. If the child is too young to make this connection, find and teach them to use a power song you know they love e.g. Let It Go from *Frozen*.
 - b. *Drawing something to use as a power symbol* - Sketch something on their hand that they can use to draw strength from if and when needed e.g. love hearts that they can press to their own heart to help them feel brave. It might be best to consider drawing this prior to falling asleep so that a discussion about what they want drawn does not ensue in the middle of the night.
 - c. *Superhero spray* – Before bed, pass them an invisible can of their favourite superhero's spray. This spray can be used to go over any bad feelings or thoughts left over from a nightmare.

- d. *Deep breathing* – Breathing helps calm the mind. One way to teach children to breathe is by using the candle stick strategy, which is where they hold up all of their fingers and then one-by-one blow them out. As they blow them out, the fingers fold over until all fingers have been blown out. NOTE: In instances where children say their feelings are still there, have them repeat this strategy over and over until they train their brain to focus on the breathing rather than the thoughts in their heads.
- e. *Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT tapping)* – EFT is a little complicated to write about in a short article, however, there are a lot of useful YouTube how-to videos. In short, this technique aims to reduce distress and emotional dysregulation by tapping specific points of the body as the person focuses on the problem.
- f. *Butterfly hugs* – Butterfly hugs are perhaps a simplified version of EFT tapping and something that can work well for very young children. The concept for butterfly hugs is to get the child to cross their arms across their bodies and then tap one arm with their opposite hand, one at a time, creating a steadying and calming rhythm that will help them regulate.

Now that strategies for nightmares have been considered, our focus will move towards night terrors.

Night terrors need to be dealt with in a different way to nightmares, mainly because night terrors are something that will not wake the child. Typically, the child will not have any recollection of them either, despite the fact that they may demonstrate intense fear, sit up screaming and be confused and unresponsive. For this reason, the possible steps to take are different to the ones outlined above. They are as follows:

1. *Do not wake the child* – Unlike nightmares, children, when experiencing night terrors, are not likely to be in REM sleep. Instead, they will be in a phase of deep sleep, meaning that they will be less responsive and coherent.
2. *Ensure their safety* – Making sure the child is safe during a night terror is perhaps the biggest task to be undertaken. It will be frightening for the adults involved to watch, but simply making sure the child does not move into or hit anything that could hurt them is paramount.
3. *Stay calm yourself* – Employ strategies that will support you during these times. It is especially difficult to stay calm when children are experiencing a night terror, however, it is possible to train yourself to keep a level head during these times. If doubt exists around this statement, just ask a paramedic, doctor or pilot if they can override panic when really bad things start to happen.
4. *Consistent routines* – Consistent routines will be especially important in overcoming night terrors because it is believed that one of the key causes of night terrors is poor sleep patterns. In a child's life, sleep is not a matter of quality over quantity. It is quantity tucked snugly alongside quality. Setting calming routines up with clear expectations around when to go to sleep and when to wake up will help any parent, even those who have children who experience nightmares as opposed to night terrors.
5. *Decreasing stress and anxiety* – If adults are to successfully decrease stress and anxiety in children's lives, they must first take away the things that cause stress. Ironically, the type of stress that leads to anxiety is not the part of a child's day that adults couldn't make run smoothly for them but rather the moments where adults intervene and prevent children from experiencing and managing stressful situations. For example, managing disappointment when they do not get a toy or treat they might want, figuring out how to get their preferred friend to play with them, engaging in conflict with a sibling. Naturally caveats exist around these examples and to gauge if an adult is unsure, check in with a qualified professional. On the other hand, other stressors such as family conflict, inappropriate viewing content etc. need to be examined and removed to help children. Also be aware of the amount of blue light children are being exposed to prior to bed time. In order for the brain to send messages that it is tired, children (and adults) need to avoid exposure to blue light, thus meaning, offering an iPad to watch to help settle a child is likely to keep a child up for longer.
6. *Journalling* – Many professionals swear by the idea of keeping a journal to log patterns in one's life and night terrors (and/or nightmares) are no exception. By logging down the times, frequency and possible stressors/events that occurred in a child's day, an adult might be in a better position to understand and eliminate the trigger that ignites a night terror (and/or nightmare) episode.
7. *Scheduled awakening* – If patterns can be established, i.e. a child has a night terror at a certain time of the night, adults can wake a child temporarily (preferably around 15 minutes prior to their usual night terror occurrence). This temporary disruption can sometimes be enough to trigger a new sleep cycle.

8. *Avoid bringing the episode up* – If children do not recollect having a night terror, avoid bringing it to their attention. Knowing that they experience these events might trigger unnecessary worries and create secondary problems such as not wanting to go to sleep.

Summing it up

Whether children experience nightmares or night terrors, both can be disruptive and trigger multiple emotions equally in children and adults. Nightmares are a common occurrence in childhood and are typically triggered as a result of a child's overactive imagination and inability to separate fantasy from reality. Nightmares can spark worries in children and create situations that make them resistant to the idea of going to bed and/or back to sleep. Establishing a clear routine and helping them understand sleep time expectations will provide a safe place from which they can work and manage their stress and influx of negative emotions.

Night terrors can also trigger a range of worrying emotions, particularly for the adult/s trying to support the child. The reason adults might find these episodes more difficult than the child is that often children will not be coherent or even recall the event. It will not always be possible to identify the reasons for night terrors, but like nightmares, it is important to establish rituals and routines that will set children up for the best outcomes possible. Using strategies to support and manage negative emotions will improve outcomes for everyone involved and prevent the likelihood of these situations escalating and creating secondary problems. Regardless of children experiencing nightmares or night terrors, if adults are unsure of what to do or how to best support their child, seek support from an experienced and qualified professional.

Recommended sleep times for children

Age	Recommended sleep for children in a 24hr period
Babies (4 months to 12 months)	12 – 16 hours (including daytime naps)
Toddlers (1 to 2 years)	11 – 14 hours (including daytime naps)
Preschoolers (3 to 5 years)	10 – 13 hours (including daytime naps)
Primary aged children (6 to 12 years)	9 – 11 hours
Adolescents (13 to 18 years)	8 – 10 hours

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