

Nightmares and Night terrors

By Natalie Ebrill- Sleep and Settle

Sleep is valuable no matter how little you get and when asleep it is nice to sleep soundly! Sudden alarming screaming in the middle of the night is frightening for parents as well as the child. There are differences in the identification and handling of nightmares and night terrors and they usually occur at different times of the night. Lets explore these common events.

Night terrors: Night terrors usually occur in the first half of the night a few hours after the child has gone to sleep. Often the child's eyes are still closed and they appear half asleep as if sleep walking, despite the screaming and distress. It is often difficult to comfort the child and this can be very distressing for the parents. Waking the child may give them a fright and make it harder for them to get back to sleep.

Triggers:

1. Fevers or overheating from clothing or heating. If this is the case for your child, remove some covers or clothing, try wiping a cool wash cloth over their head and/or body if appropriate and cool down the room.

2. Drinking too much water/fluid before bed. Reduce fluid consumption from 4pm until bedtime. If you child is demanding lots of drinks at night time or overnight and sweating a lot also consider testing them for diabetes.

3. Not being able to self-settle to sleep. If your child requires certain 'conditions' to be in place in order for them to go to sleep eg: a light, music, a mobile or yourself/another carer etc, when they wake in between sleep cycles overnight their brain is trying to go back to sleep but also trying to wake up and see if the 'conditions' are still the same as when they went to sleep. This struggle between sleep cycles can contribute to the night terrors. Naturally, a self settling sleep strategy will help with this trigger.

Parents can assist the child in calming down by gently soothing or cuddling the child (but not attempting to wake them) until they are calm enough to return to sleep and preventing them from hurting themselves. Night terrors are common in babies from around one year of age up to primary school aged children.

Nightmares: Nightmares also referred to as bad dreams, usually appear after midnight in the early morning dream sleep.

Triggers:

1.

Worries or events in the daytime or thoughts before bedtime. Often the child wakes in distress with their eyes open and may find it difficult to get back to sleep because they are frightened by what they remember. Staying with the child to reassure and soothe them will help them calm again for sleep. If necessary sing a few songs, read a gentle story or put on some relaxing music to help take their mind off the nightmare. Allow the child to discuss the 'story' behind the nightmare as this may give you an idea of what is triggering them. Nightmares are common from the toddler age and older when the imagination kicks in and they are being influenced by other children or events.

Tips to help prevent nightmares and night terrors:

- Encourage a consistent routine and bedtime each night.
- Offer gentle, calming activities before bed.
- Choose gentle, happy stories before bed.
- Eliminate tv/dvd's/computer games before bed
- Remove tv's, computers, electronic games from bedroom to prevent unsupervised use.
- Revise linen and covers on the bed and choice of pyjamas or sleeping bags.
- Encourage a small drink with cleaning of the teeth before bed but not too much fluid.
- Take note of the theme and details of the nightmares that your children share with you.
- Enquire with your child's daycare centre/preschool/school about monitoring any unpleasant experiences either socially or academically which may be contributing to your child's night mares.
- Try a soothing cd on repeat all night to encourage a restful sleep such as "Music for Dreaming" or a meditation cd.
- Teach your child how to self settle to sleep.

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