

Bedtime Problems

Kids need plenty of sleep to rest their growing bodies and minds. But for many kids, bedtime is no fun and for many parents, getting kids to go to bed and stay there can be frustrating.

Heading off bedtime troubles

Make sure your child has everything he needs to get a good night's sleep, including:

- A regular bedtime
- A reminder to start winding down about 30 minutes before bedtime
- A trip to the bathroom to use the toilet, wash up and brush teeth
- A consistent bedtime routine that includes soothing activities, such as story time
- A place to sleep that is a comfortable temperature, is well ventilated and has a night light if the child wants one
- A bedroom without a TV, computer or video games
- A reminder to stay quiet and in bed, and a final good night from you
- Praise the next morning for staying in bed

If your child won't stay in bed

- Return him to his room right away.
- Find out what your child is afraid of? Checking for monsters under the bed or having a night light on may help him feel safer.
- If your child cries or protests, wait a few minutes and then go back in and check on him.
- If your child continues to cry or call for you, wait a little longer each time before you go back to check.
- Remind your child that it's time to sleep and if he stays quiet, you'll come back in and check on him in a few minutes.

Other factors that can disrupt sleep

Nightmares

Nightmares are pretty common in childhood, especially in kids younger than 10. The occasional nightmare is generally not a cause for concern.

There's no proven way to prevent nightmares, but you might try having your daughter avoid scary books, movies and video games before sleep. Having a happy, peaceful bedtime routine also can help. Using a nightlight, sleeping with the bedroom door open and having a security item (like a favorite blanket or stuffed animal) can help kids feel safer. Some kids even like to keep a flashlight next to their bed.

Recurring nightmares may signal fear or anxiety worth exploring through discussions with your child or with the help of your doctor. If you're concerned about the nightmares, your child has them often or she seems afraid during the day, talk to her doctor.

Night terrors

Night terrors are somewhat mysterious. It might seem as though they're the same as a bad dream, but they aren't. Night terrors usually happen in the first 2 or 3 hours of sleep, whereas bad dreams often happen in the early morning hours.

During a night terror, kids don't actually wake up and don't respond to efforts to comfort or reassure them. Night terrors are generally not remembered in the morning, while bad dreams are often at least partially recalled.

The good news is that night terrors don't seem to have any harmful effects on kids who have them and they usually outgrow them. Experts believe that night terrors might be caused by the over-arousal of a child's immature central nervous system during sleep. Some kids may inherit a tendency for this over-arousal — about 80% who have night terrors have a family member who also had them or sleepwalking (a similar type of sleep disturbance). Sometimes night terrors are more common in kids who are going through stressful life events, on certain medications, not getting enough sleep or having too much caffeine.

Sleepwalking

Kids tend to sleepwalk within an hour or two of falling asleep and may walk around for anywhere from a few seconds to 30 minutes.

Sleepwalking is far more common in kids than in adults, as most sleepwalkers outgrow it by the early teen years. It may run in families, so if you or your partner are or were sleepwalkers, your child may be too.

Other factors that may bring on a sleepwalking episode include:

- lack of sleep or fatigue
- irregular sleep schedules
- illness or fever
- certain medications
- stress

Of course, getting out of bed and walking around while still sleeping is the most obvious sleepwalking symptom. But young sleepwalkers may also:

- sleeptalk
- be hard to wake up
- seem dazed
- be clumsy

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- not respond when spoken to
- sit up in bed and go through repeated motions, such as rubbing their eyes or fussing with their pajamas

Also, sleepwalkers' eyes are open, but they don't see the same way they do when they're awake and they often think they're in different rooms of the house or different places altogether.

Sleepwalking is not usually a sign that something is emotionally or psychologically wrong with a child.

Sleepwalking is rarely caused by an underlying medical condition. And it doesn't cause any emotional harm.

Sleepwalkers probably won't even remember the nighttime stroll.

How to keep a sleepwalker safe

Although sleepwalking isn't dangerous by itself, it's important to take precautions so that your sleepwalking child is less likely to fall down, run into something or walk out the front door. To help keep your sleepwalker out of harm's way:

- Try not to wake a sleepwalker because this might scare your child. Instead, gently guide him or her back to bed.
- Lock the windows and doors, not just in your child's bedroom but throughout your home, in case your young sleepwalker decides to wander. You may consider extra locks or child safety locks on doors.
- To prevent falls, don't let your sleepwalker sleep in a bunk bed.
- Remove sharp or breakable things from around your child's bed.
- Keep dangerous objects out of reach.
- Remove obstacles from your child's room and throughout your home to prevent a stumble. Especially eliminate clutter on the floor (i.e., in your child's bedroom or playroom).
- Install safety gates outside your child's room and/or at the top of any stairs.