



Young children can't always tell the difference between dreams and reality. Some children have dreams that feel so "real" and scary that they wake up upset. This can upset parents too and cause everyone to lose sleep. As a parent, there are things you can do to help your child have fewer nightmares so that everyone can sleep better.

## What is a nightmare?

A nightmare is a very scary dream. It may cause your child to wake up frightened and crying, or it could cause them to wet the bed.

- Watching or hearing TV shows and news programs that are scary to the child.

## Why is it important to help your child with their nightmares?

## What causes nightmares?

- Frightening experiences, including war and moving to a new country. Children (even babies) hold memories in their bodies. They may remember smells, sounds and sights that can cause nightmares.
- Feelings that young children are not able to understand, talk about, or ask for help with.
- Feeling insecure about the changes in their lives or their parents' stress, worry and fear.

- Too many scary dreams may cause a child to feel worried during the day. Children do best when they feel safe and secure.
- Good sleep is VERY important for good health, learning and recovery from stress. Interruptions in sleep decrease the quality and length of sleep.
- When children have nightmares, parents lose sleep as well. Too little sleep means that both parents and children can become irritable.
- Children who have nightmares may become afraid to go to sleep, making bedtime difficult.

## How can you help your child sleep comfortably and have fewer nightmares?

- Children need lots of physical activity to be tired and to sleep soundly. Outdoor play and fresh air are good for the body and help to relax the brain.
- Avoid food and drinks that contain caffeine. They can make falling asleep difficult. Many soft drinks, chocolate, tea and coffee have caffeine.
- Give your child a protein-rich bedtime snack, such as meat, cheese, eggs or tofu. Hungry children will wake up in the night.
- Have a bedtime routine that starts at the same time each night. It should be about 30 minutes long and could involve quiet activities, dim lighting, a warm bath, lots of cuddles and stories/songs/prayers.
- Make sure your child gets 11 to 12 hours of sleep. Young children may also need a nap during the day.
- When your child is tired, they should nap or sleep in bed. When children fall asleep in different places at different times, especially in front of the TV, it will be harder for them to fall asleep and stay asleep at night.
- Your child may need a small night light, although complete darkness is healthier.
- A cool room with a warm blanket makes for a better sleep.

## What should you do when your child wakes up from a nightmare?

- Offer your child comfort. Be calm and kind.
- If your child has wet the bed, clean up quickly and know that your child did not mean to do this.

- If your child is old enough, ask them what their dream was about.
- Sing to, rock and cuddle your child until they fall asleep again.
- The next day, ask your child to draw the scary dream; then tear the drawing to pieces and throw it away.
- If the dream was about a scary memory, talk to your child about it. Help your child understand that it happened long ago, somewhere else, and that now they are safe.
- Ask your child to draw (or draw for them) a place that feels safe, happy and has good memories. It might be real or pretend. Put this drawing beside their bed for them to look at when they go to sleep. You might also put a picture of your smiling face there.

## What to do if night terrors and nightmares don't go away:

- Night terrors are more severe nightmares. Your child might scream, not be able to wake up or not recognize you.
- The occasional night terror is not cause for concern. Night terrors are usually not remembered by the child, although they are upsetting to parents and interrupt the sleep of the whole family.
- If nightmares or night terrors are frequent and/or don't go away after you have tried all of the strategies above, ask your doctor for help.

Visit [cmascanada.ca/cnc/parents](https://cmascanada.ca/cnc/parents) for more multilingual parent information



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