

# Sleep disturbance



**Many children's sleep is disturbed by nightmares, night terrors or sleepwalking. While these can frighten children and worry parents children usually grow out of them in time.**

## Why do they happen?

There is often no clear reason why sleep disturbances happen. They are:

- more likely if children are stressed, unwell or not getting enough sleep
- not linked with any emotional or mental health problems now or later in life. It's important to comfort children if they are afraid and to make sure they are safe. If sleep disturbances keep happening or you are worried, talk with your doctor.

## Nightmares

Nightmares are bad dreams that can upset and frighten children. They can be about imaginary things such as monsters or something real in your child's life. Young children can wake up thinking something bad has happened. As they get older they understand that dreams are not real.

Nightmares can be linked with worries and fears. They happen more often after a traumatic event or when a child is stressed, unwell, taking medication or not getting enough sleep.

If your child wakes from a nightmare, comfort them and help them feel safe. You could:

- stay with them until they go back to sleep
- leave their bedroom door open or a night-light on
- try a gentle massage, cuddle, sing a song or play some gentle music
- talk with them calmly about the nightmare for a short time.

It can help to:

- reduce daytime stress e.g. if toilet training try putting it off for a while
- avoid TV, computers and video games before bed, especially any that could cause them to feel stressed or excited
- have a relaxing bedtime routine e.g. a bath, a quiet story, a song and a goodnight kiss
- try getting your child to relax and think of a happy, safe place while they go to sleep
- try using your child's imagination. Ask them to draw what is scaring them and then screw it up and throw it away. This can give a sense of power over fears. If your child often has the same nightmare with a scary ending, try talking during the day about a better ending.

**Dreams help people deal with their worries. As children become more confident in dealing with problems, they tend to have fewer nightmares.**

## Night terrors

Night terrors are when a child becomes very agitated during deep sleep. Children usually experience night terrors between the ages of 18 months and six years.

They may:

- scream suddenly or cry and look pale and scared
- kick and thrash about
- call for you but not 'see' you and cannot be comforted
- breathe heavily, perspire and stare with wide-open eyes.

This can last for a few minutes or up to 20 minutes.

A child having a night terror is not dreaming. They are also not awake. In the morning they will not remember what happened.



- It's best not to wake your child from a night terror. They may be confused and take longer to settle.
- Stay with your child even if they don't let you comfort them. Make sure they are safe. Guide them back to bed if needed.
- Talking about it the next day may embarrass and worry your child as they will not remember what happened.
- If the night terror happens around the same time each night, try waking your child briefly about 10–15 minutes before that time and then settle them back to sleep.
- Make sure your child gets enough sleep, has a relaxing bedtime routine and goes to the toilet before bed.

**Night terrors may scare you but they don't harm or scare your child.**

## Sleepwalking

Sleepwalking is when your child walks or performs simple tasks while asleep. It can start when children are between three and seven years old. They will sleepwalk less as they get older. Children have no control over what they do when they sleepwalk and may hurt themselves.

- It's best not to wake your child as it can upset them. Stay calm and guide your child back to bed.
- Make sure they are safe by locking doors and windows, putting barriers across stairs and placing heaters, electric cords and any other dangerous objects out of the way.
- Tying a bell to your child's bedroom door can alert you when they sleepwalk.
- Protect your child from being teased about it. Let them know it is not a sign of any problem or illness.

## Sleep 'starts'

Sleep 'starts' or 'jerks' are sudden, usually single jerks of the arms, legs or whole body at the beginning of sleep. These are common in people of all ages and the causes are unknown.

## Sleep talking

Sleep talking is common. It is more likely if children are excited or worried about something. What they say may be clear or unclear and they may sit up when talking. They are not likely to remember the next day. Try talking with them about their worries during the day. Sleep talking can keep others awake so you might have to change where your children sleep.

## Teeth grinding

Young children from about 10 months can grind their teeth. It usually doesn't cause any damage. Older children can put pressure on their teeth by clenching their jaw. This can cause damage to the teeth, sore cheek muscles or headaches. Talk to your dentist if you are worried.

### Want more information?

#### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

#### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment. See [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com) for child health and parenting information

#### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides e.g. 'Sleep (0–6years)', 'Bedwetting', 'Living with toddlers' and 'Dealing with a crisis' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

#### Raising Children Network

For parenting information  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)



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#### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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Revised:08/2015.