

NIGHT TERRORS



Taking the Fear Out of Bedtime Hours

You're awakened by a blood-curdling scream. You race to your child's room to find her sitting bolt upright in bed, howling, her eyes wide open and filled with terror. You call her name but she stares right through you, as if you aren't there. She may begin thrashing and striking out. She may even try to get out of bed. Then as suddenly as it began, the "spell" is over and she's sound asleep.

"Most parents who witness this say the child looks like she's possessed," says Barbara Howard, M.D., assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. "But there is a perfectly rational explanation. The child is experiencing a night terror."

Though night terrors may sound like something that requires professional help, they are actually normal and fairly common in children. Experts say they occur during the deepest part of the sleep cycle, about an hour or two after the child falls asleep.

"Normally, this is the point where the child cycles into a lighter sleep where dreams occur," says Ronald Dahl, M.D., director of the Children's Sleep Evaluation Center at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in Pittsburgh and associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. "But particularly if the child is very tired, a split may occur. Part of the system says it's time to go into light sleep, but another part says, 'No, I'm still tired.' So part of the brain stays deeply asleep while another part goes into a high-arousal state."

The child who is having a night terror is not awake, yet not quite asleep, notes Dr. Dahl. And the "terror" aspect of this phenomenon really only registers on the parents. The child herself is not conscious, nor does she remember playing out this scene from *The Exorcist* the next day, says Dr. Dahl.

Nightmares, on the other hand, are very frightening for children. "A nightmare is essentially a dream that is sufficiently scary to wake a child up," says Dr. Dahl. "In fact, the child may wake up quickly, become fully awake and have trouble getting back to sleep. He may be a little confused, but he'll probably be coherent. A nightmare is likely to occur late in the night or early in the morning, in the second half of the sleep period."

Both night terrors and nightmares tend to run their course and disappear over time. But there are a few techniques you can use to make things easier for your child.

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Stay calm. "Remind yourself that although a night terror looks scary, it's not a seizure. It's not a terrible thing," says Dr. Dahl. "Night terrors are very common and normal, especially in kids between the ages of three and five."

Stand by until it's over. Though it may be difficult to watch your child screaming, there's really nothing you can do to stop a night terror, says Dr. Howard. "But you can make sure the child is safe when it's happening by restraining her if necessary. Children do sometimes hurt themselves thrashing or running around. And it's almost impossible to wake them."

Don't mention it. "Don't talk to your child about the episode the next morning," says Dr. Howard. "And don't let siblings talk to her about it either. Kids don't remember night terrors. But if they find out later what they did, they may get upset about being out of control."

Try a preventive wake-up call. "If your child is experiencing terrors, you could try waking her up about 30 minutes after she goes to bed, and then letting her go back to sleep," says Dr. Howard. "That breaks up the sleep cycle and tends to interrupt the pattern of the night terrors."

Make sure your child is getting enough sleep. "Increase the total amount of sleep your child is getting," suggests Dr. Dahl. "If she's fairly young, it might mean letting her go back to taking daily naps. For an older kid, try letting her sleep longer in the morning or put her to bed a little earlier."

The reason for this, Dr. Dahl explains, is that the more tired a child is, the more difficult it will be for her to switch from deep sleep to light sleep. "The classic time for night terrors to occur is when young children first give up their daily naps," he says. "The first time a kid stays up for 12 hours or more, there's more pressure on her sleep system than she's ever had, and it drives her deeply into sleep, deeper than she's ever been. At the end of that first deep sleep cycle is when she's most likely to have a night terror."