

Nighttime Fears

Jodi Mindell “A Clinical Guide to Pediatric Sleep”

It is normal for children to have nighttime fears, especially at bedtime. Most children have fears at some point. Bedtime fears are normal and part of normal development. Fear of the dark and other nighttime fears develop as children begin to understand that they can get hurt or be harmed. Studies find that up to 85% of school-aged children and 50% of adolescents have nighttime fears. Children have different fears at different ages. For example, many young children are afraid of monsters, whereas school-aged children and adolescents often report fears related to intruders and worrying about daily events.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD IS AFRAID AT BEDTIME (OR OTHER TIMES OF THE NIGHT)

Dealing with a child who is afraid of the dark or scared to go to bed at night can be like walking a tightrope. There is a fine line between wanting to reassure him and not wanting to reinforce his fears. If the fears are ignored, your child will not be reassured. If your child is reassured too much, you may be giving the subtle message that there is something to fear. If bedtime fears are affecting your child’s ability to fall asleep and stay asleep, try some of the following.

Listen and understand: Try to understand your child’s fears. Don’t dismiss or make fun of them. Fears that seem silly to an adult may be very real to a child.

Reassure your child: It is important to reassure your child if he is afraid. When your child clings to you as he is being tucked in or calls out in fear, you should go back to his bed and find out what is wrong. Say something like, “You are safe; we are here to make sure you stay safe.” Be sure to communicate that he is safe over and over again.

Teach coping skills: Teach your child coping skills and discuss other ways to respond to nighttime fears, such as by “being brave” and thinking positive thoughts (e.g., “monsters are just pretend,” “I can take care of myself,” and “The dark is fun”). You can also talk about how you deal with something that frightens you. Or read stories about children who are afraid and conquer their fears.

Gradually expose your child to fears: Develop a step-wise approach to expose your child to specific fears. For example, if your child is afraid of the dark, spend increasing amounts of time in dark places (starting with 30 seconds and increasing in 1-minute increments) or gradually dimming the lights in his room over a few weeks.

Use imagination and be creative: You can use your imagination to fight imaginary fears such as of monsters. Many families have found “monster spray” to be a wonderful way to help a child cope with bedtime fears. Take a spray bottle and fill it with water (be sure that it has not previously had any chemicals in it such as plant food). At bedtime, you or your child can spray the room to keep the monsters away. In addition to monster spray, there are other ways that you can be creative and help your child. For example, consider allowing him to have a pet for nighttime company. Even a bedside fish tank might help.

Introduce a security object: Helping your child become attached to a security object, such as a stuffed animal, that he can keep in bed with him may be beneficial. You can either tell your child that the stuffed animal is scared and it is his job to help. Or you can tell your child that the stuffed animal is there to help him. Either way works and may help your child to feel more relaxed throughout the night.

Use a night-light: No matter what your child is afraid of, a night-light can help. A low nightlight is fine as long as it does not prevent your child from falling asleep. Another thing to try is leaving the bedroom door open so that your child doesn't feel isolated from the rest of the family.

Avoid scary television shows: Avoid scary TV shows, videos, or stories that may add to your child's fears. Remember that what may not seem scary to you, such as the news, may be scary for your child.

Teach relaxation: Teaching your child relaxation strategies can help him relax at bedtime and fall asleep. This will give him something else to think about while lying in bed and help to distract him from his fearful thoughts. Also, it is impossible to be relaxed and scared at the same time.

Discuss your child's fears during the day: Depending on how old your child is and how well he can talk, try discussing his fears during the day. Talk about how he can be less frightened at night. In addition, build his self-confidence during the day. Feeling secure throughout the day may help him feel more secure at night as well.

Set limits: At the same time that you are reassuring your child, you need to set limits. Limits are necessary to prevent your child's “being scared” behavior from being reinforced. Checking closets and leaving a low night-light on is reasonable, but sleeping with your child every night may not be as it sends the message that he can only feel safe if you are with him.

Have him stay in his bed: Don't encourage your child to get out of bed. He should stay in bed and find out for himself that he really is safe so that he can learn to

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overcome his fears. If you bring your child into your room, or downstairs while finishing the dinner dishes, the message is that his bed isn't a safe place to be. It is a much better strategy to stay with him in his room than to have him join you in yours. If your child is too frightened to stay in his room alone, it is okay to occasionally stay by his bed until he falls asleep. Don't do this too frequently, or for too many nights in a row, because he may come to depend on your presence. If your child is anxious about your leaving, check on him frequently. Begin by briefly checking and reassuring him every few minutes, and then every 10 minutes until he is asleep. Similarly, if your child wakes up in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep because he is frightened, go and reassure him. Repeat the message about being safe and tell him that he will be fine. If he gets up in the middle of the night and comes into your room, take him right back and gently tuck him into bed. Just keep reassuring him.

Start a star or sticker chart: Some children receive reinforcement for their fears. They may be given lots of attention for being afraid or receive special treats. If this is the case, switch the scenario. Give your child extra attention for dealing with his fears. Tell him how proud you are of him for being brave. Set up a star system. Have him earn stars for being brave and sleeping on his own. After earning a certain number of stars, he can turn them in for a treat, such as watching a favorite video, going to the park, or baking cookies. Be as specific as possible as to what is to be rewarded (staying in bed all night, not calling out after lights out), and set up the reward system so that there is a high likelihood of success. You also can reinforce progressively appropriate behaviors, such as dimming the lights gradually over a week's time or staying in the bedroom for longer periods.

Address severe or persistent anxiety: If your child's anxiety and fears continue, are severe, or are present during the day, consider taking him for a psychological evaluation aimed at identifying and treating anxiety.