

CHILDREN'S NIGHTMARES

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist**

- A nightmare is a very distressing dream which usually forces at least partial awakening
- The dreamer may feel any number of disturbing emotions in a nightmare, such as anger, guilt, sadness or depression, but the most common feelings are fear and anxiety
- Nightmare themes may vary widely from person to person and from time to time for any person, but the most common theme is being chased
- Adults are commonly chased by an unknown male figure whereas children are commonly chased by an animal or some fantasy figure
- Just about everyone has them at one time or another and the majority of children have nightmares between the ages of 3 or 4 and 7 or 8
- The content of nightmares usually relates to developmental challenges: Toddlers have nightmares about separation from their parents; Preschoolers about monsters or the dark; and school aged children about death or real dangers
- Frequent nightmares may be caused by violent TV shows or movies
- Nightmares are a normal part of coping with changes in our lives and are not necessarily signs of pathology, in fact, they may be positive indications that we are actively coping with new challenges
- The raw terror that lingers after a nightmare may disturb the child's insecurity and bring on insecurity for hours and even days afterwards
- About 5% to 10% have nightmares once a month or more frequently

Helping Your Child Handle Nightmares:

1. Reassure and cuddle your child:

- Explain to your child that she was having a bad dream
- Sit on the bed until she is calm
- Offer to leave the bedroom door open (never close the door on a fearful child)
- Provide a night-light, especially if your child fears the dark

2. Help your child talk about the Bad Dream during the day:

- Your child may not remember what the dream was about unless you can remind him of something he said about it when he woke up
 - If your child was dreaming about falling or being chased, reassure him that lots of children have this dream
 - If your child has the same bad dream over and over again, help him imagine a good ending to the bad dream
 - Encourage your child to use a strong person or magic weapon to help him overcome the bad person or event in the dream
3. *Protect your child against frightening movies and TV shows:*
- For many children, violent and/or horror movies cause bedtime fears and nightmares and these fears can persist for months or years
 - Forbid these types of movies and shows for children under 13 years of age
 - Between 13 and 17, the maturity and sensitivity of your child must be considered in deciding when he is ready to deal with the uncut version of violent movies
4. *Avoid feeding them anything containing stimulants like sugar and caffeine near bedtime*
- Stimulants cause children to be up later and as a result they may cause nightmares
5. *Never make fun of your child's ghouls or ghosts – be loving and supportive*
- Self explanatory

As parents we need to give our children reassurances and encouragement's to explore creative solutions to dream dilemmas and thus restore their ability to play with the images in their nightmares rather than feel threatened or demoralized.

WELCOME THE DREAM