

Fact Sheet

Strategies to Support a Parent with a Child Who is Having Nightmares/Nightfears

General Overview

Children who have nightmares and nightfears can be quite normal for young children. The difficulty often occurs is that the child does not have the language to be able to express exactly what is happening. You as the parent talking and comforting are also increasing the child's vocabulary. It is very important to comfort the child and that the comfort occurs in the environment where the nightmare/terror occurred. Removing the child from the bedroom may only slow down the process of the child overcoming the fear.

Initial Strategies

- Observe and assess the environment i.e. the child's room. Spend time lying on the bed and trying to see what the room looks like to the child. What do the shadows convey? What do the pictures, toys etc look like in the half dark?
- Spend time in the darkened room with the child using encouraging and descriptive words such as "how warm and comfy the soft light makes you feel" or "having those special friends (teddy) in the room makes me feel safe". What you are doing is helping the child to see his/her room as a very special safe place to be.
- Avoid highly active activities before bedtime.
- Establish a ritual with bedtime. There are different schools of thought whether "checking" for monsters is the best approach. This is best determined by you the parent remembering that a toddler has a very vivid imagination even if he/she cannot verbalise it.
- Often with the toddler age group imaginative play is very new and exciting. Utilise these interests to help the child settle and overcome his/her fears of nightmares and terrors. E.g. actively encourage your child to teach teddy/favourite soft toy how to go to bed and how to calm doll or teddy when they are upset or have had a bad dream. This will assist you to identify what works for the teddy or doll may also be of comfort for the child.
- Acknowledge the fear that the child has at the same time letting the child know that you are there and will protect them.
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- Use the initial information through books and web site to gain an understanding of nightmares and night terrors. This will also help you understand what is occurring with your child in this context.
- Identify whether the child is having a nightmare or a night terror.
- Remain consistent with your strategies eg if you use a night light continue to do so.

References

Louise Porter

Children are people too 3rd Edition Small Poppies
ISBN 0-646-4-122-X

Page 87.

Susan Dodd

Managing problem behaviours MacLennan & Petty
ISBN 0864330960

Page 2.

Websites

www.dream.net.au/nightmares

www.parentkidsrights.com

www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/nightmares_and_night_terrors

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