

# CHILDHOOD NIGHTMARES

## WHAT ARE NIGHTMARES?

Nightmares are scary dreams that wake someone up and usually happen during the second half of the night. Nightmares are most common between ages 3 and 12. They can feel very real and may result in feeling upset, scared, or worried even after awakening.

## WHAT CAUSES NIGHTMARES?

Nightmares can be related to real-life feelings like stress, worry, or fear. Other times, they happen for no clear reason. Nightmares can be linked to trauma but do not always reflect a bad experience.

TIP: To help prevent nightmares, create a calming bedtime routine and limit exposure to scary stories, images, or shows, especially before bed.

## WHAT TO DO AFTER A NIGHTMARE

If your child wakes up from a nightmare, the best response is to comfort them and help them feel safe. If your child is very upset, use grounding techniques to help them regulate their emotions and remind them it was just a dream. Once your child feels calmer, encourage them to talk about the dream if they want to, and gently remind them that dreams are not real, even though they can feel very scary. While it may be tempting to let your child sleep in your room, it is important to help them return to their own bed once they feel calm to build their confidence in sleeping independently.

## IS IT A NIGHTMARE?

Nightmares and sleep terrors are different. Sleep terrors usually occur earlier in the night. Sleep terrors are most common in toddlers and preschoolers. During a sleep terror, a child may cry, look terrified, and push you away if comforted but will not remember it in the morning. You do not need to comfort them, as sleep terrors are not a sign of poor sleep quality. If they are frequent or disruptive, consider talking to a sleep specialist.

# Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT)

**IRT helps you take control of your dreams by changing the scary parts!**

**#1**

Start by writing or drawing your nightmare in as much detail as possible. Capture everything possible about the dream (i.e., how it felt, what happened, and who was there).

**#2**

Write or draw the dream again, but stop when it starts to feel frightening. Then, change the story. What if the scary thing became funny or you had superpowers? Make the threat smaller and yourself stronger!

**#3**

The next day, write your new dream, starting from the beginning and continuing to the positive ending. Be detailed! You do not need to write the dream every day; Verbal/mental rehearsal is often enough.

**#4**


After practicing during the day, recall the new dream at bedtime. You can say it out loud or spend a few minutes imagining it in your head. Reviewing your written version may help. Then, do a grounding exercise to relax and focus on the present. Practicing both dream rehearsal and grounding helps your brain feel more natural with the new version.

**#5**

Continue bedtime recall for at least 10 days. If nightmares persist, repeat the process of writing, rescripting, and doing at least one daytime written rehearsal. Regular practice helps you feel in control and confident in managing your dreams.


## MY NIGHTMARE

Think about the last nightmare that you can remember or bothers you the most. Close your eyes for a moment and try to remember everything you can about it. What did you see, hear, or feel? Were there any people, places, or things that stood out to you? Now, write or draw the nightmare in as much detail as possible. Do not worry about making it perfect.

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## CHANGING THE STORY

Now that you have written or drawn your nightmare, it is time to make it less scary. Write or draw the dream again but stop when it starts to feel frightening. Then, change the story. What if the scary thing became silly or you had superpowers? Make the threat smaller and yourself stronger! You are the author of your dream and can decide what happens next!

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal black ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## REHEARSING THE NEW DREAM

To help your brain learn this new skill, we need to rehearse! Write or draw your new dream, starting from the beginning and going all the way to the new ending. Make the details as detailed as possible, like a movie in your head. Practicing this at least once a day will help your brain remember your new dream and make it more natural when you sleep.

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