

Nightmares Are Very Real To Children

The University of Pittsburgh

Office of Child Development

A dream about ghosts woke Kayla in the middle of the night and sent her running into her parent's bedroom in tears.

Her parents responded the way they always respond to five-year-old Kayla's nightmares. They allowed her to climb into bed with them.

While the arrangement calms Kayla, mom and dad spend a restless night with the wiggling child in the bed. Lately, they've had a lot of restless nights. If ghosts aren't haunting Kayla's dreams, snakes and other creatures are.

What she is going through is not unusual. Most children have nightmares, which can begin around age three, but are more frequent between the ages of four and six years.

Nightmares are usually related a child's normal worries, although some can be related to things that scare a child, like fires or storms. A major change in a child's life, like moving to a new school, can also trigger a nightmare. Kayla's recent nightmare was probably triggered by a movie that had several scary scenes.

Children usually remember what a nightmare was about, but they cannot tell you about night terrors.

You can do many things to help your child deal with nightmares and night terrors.

Allowing your child to crawl into bed with you for comfort is controversial, because you may encourage the practice. Some parents don't mind their children sleeping with them; others do.

An alternative is to sit and comfort your child in his or her own bed. Remind your child that he or she is safe with you. You can also say that you know how scary dreams can be, that even you have had a nightmare.

A nightlight might help. Pointing out a favorite stuffed animal or other familiar objects in the room can be reassuring. Restarting the usual bedtime routine, such as reading a story together, may help ease stress that contributes to nightmares.

Stay with your child until he or she says you can go or falls asleep. This may take awhile at first, but it will help.

If your child wants to talk about a particular nightmare, listen. But don't try to convince a child there is nothing to be afraid of. Even imaginary monsters are scary.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.