

For Parents: Help for Children's Sleep Problems



What You Should Know

When children have experienced something very upsetting, often their sleep habits change. They may resist going to bed and falling asleep to avoid scary thoughts and dreams. They may wake up with nightmares and have trouble getting back to sleep. When kids don't sleep, their parents don't get to sleep either. It is frustrating for parents when their kids can't explain what they are thinking and feeling. When kids act up at bedtime, they may be showing their parents that they are worried and scared.

What Can Help

When your children come to you at night, upset and unable to be alone, you can best help them by doing the following:

- **Take a few seconds to calm yourself.** When your children have sleep problems, you may feel sad, powerless, or annoyed. By staying calm (or at least pretending to!), you help your child to calm. Don't add to the drama. Be warm, yet matter-of-fact.
- **Soothe your child.** Depending on your children's needs, you can hold them, rub their backs, quietly sit with them, or guide them to take slow breaths.
- **Take your child back to his/her room.** Say that you will stay until he/she feels a little better. Don't turn on all the lights, but allow some light to come into the room.
- **Encourage your child to talk about his/her fearful thoughts.** Help him/her find words for the disturbing thoughts ("I know you are having trouble sleeping. Are you feeling worried or afraid? What is worrying/ scaring you?") Help your child figure out the difference between what felt unsafe and scary then and now. Point out how and why specific dangers no longer exist.
- **Sit with your child by his/her bed.** Through your words and your touch, remind your child of your presence and your ability to keep him/her safe.
- **Quietly say that you are going back to your bed.** When your child has relaxed for a few minutes, say goodnight and reassure him/her that you are close by and that he/she is safe.
- **Calmly tell your child that you will check back in a few minutes (and do so).** If your child protests and seems distressed, say that you must go to bed soon, but you can sit a few more moments.

Other Helpful Sleep Tips

- Encouraging a young child to sleep with a familiar cuddly toy (even one he/she no longer sleeps with) may help your child start to feel safe and secure again. Don't worry that this is "moving backward." Once he/she is more comfortable, the toy will be cast aside.
- Staying calm is the best way to show your child that, while you understand why he/she feels upset, you know that there is no danger and that you are confident the family is safe.
- Your child's sleep problems and need for additional help may go on for several days. The more that you can keep to regular bedtimes and rituals, the better.
- You play an important role when your child learns from you that he/she can recover from fear. You are helping him/her regain the mastery of going to sleep that was interrupted by the scary events.