



Nightmares are very common in children, and while distressing, in and of themselves, they are not something to worry about. However, it is worth noting when your child has nightmares, as frequent or recurring nightmares can be symptomatic of a deeper problem – anxiety, trauma, distress and stress all can manifest as nightmares. Some of these underlying causes will resolve themselves in time, whereupon the nightmares fade away too. Others may need extra support from parents, other trusted adults, and professionals.

In reality, there is nothing you can do to completely prevent nightmares from occurring. Following a consistent, calming bedtime routine may help, by helping your child to feel relaxed and secure as they go to sleep. However, there are some tried-and-true things that you and your child can do to help them feel better and empowered following a nightmare.

Beating Nightmares #1: Draw the nightmare. This can help the child to get the images out of their mind, giving a sense of distance from them. It bypasses the need for words, which can be hard to find, especially for a child who is younger or very distressed. The child can use the drawings (while in progress or once complete) as a visual tool to help them describe the events of the dream to you.

Beating Nightmares #2: Change the ending. The child writes or draws a better, happier ending for their dream, picturing it in their mind and/or describing it to you in as much detail as possible, to reinforce it. A child who enjoys imaginative play, or who is physically tense from the dream, may benefit from actually acting out the new ending. This helps to release tension held in the muscles, leaving the child feeling more relaxed and calmer afterwards.

Beating Nightmares #3: Invest in a dreamcatcher. Most New Age stores sell dreamcatchers in a wide range of colours and designs, and there are lots of instructions online for kids to make their own. A dreamcatcher is a very tangible symbol which children often find reassuring. As much as anything, it represents the child's taking charge over the bad dreams.

Beating Nightmares #4: Talk to the monster. If the nightmare contained clear characters, such as a monster, ask your child what the monster wanted to tell them. Your child can have a conversation with the monster, speaking for both. If it helps them to have something concrete to look at, you could get a cushion to represent the monster, otherwise they can just imagine it. Don't "stand in" for monster yourself, or use a toy, as the frightened, angry, and/or sad feelings your child is experiencing towards the monster may become displaced onto you/the toy, which can be very confusing for them. Having a conversation with the monster helps to make it less scary. It also provides your child with an opportunity to listen to what their unconscious mind might be trying to tell them.

Beating Nightmares #5: Pray. If you are a praying family, prayers can be used to calm an anxious child before going to bed, or soothe a child who's woken up afraid. It can also be helpful for adults. In my early twenties, I had a specific "nightmare prayer" which was short, simple and rhyming (making it easier for my panicked brain to remember). Mine was adapted slightly from a prayer in the Celtic Book of Prayer: "Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm/still me Lord keep me from harm/let all the tumult inside me cease/enfold me Lord in your peace." Your child may want to make

up their own prayer, or use one from a book of prayers. You may like to pray with your child over their room and sleep each night as part of the bedtime ritual, or pray with them that God will set an angel on watch to guard their sleep. For a non-religious family, a simple mantra such as, "I am safe" may have a similar effect.

Beating Nightmares #6: If your child continues to be troubled by nightmares, they may benefit from having some sessions with a child therapist. The therapist will help them to process the source of their underlying distress, and find new and helpful ways to express it. Find a therapist who specialises in working with children, and with whom you and your child feel safe. A good therapist will not solve your child's problems for them, they will work with your child and family to empower and equip them to solve their own problems, and to flourish.

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