

# Sleep disturbance

## Parent Easy Guide 44



Parenting SA

Many children's sleep is disturbed by nightmares, night terrors or sleepwalking. These can frighten children and worry parents.

- > There is often no clear reason why they happen. They are usually nothing to worry about and most children will grow out of them in time.
- > They are more likely if children are stressed, unwell or not getting enough sleep. They are not linked with any emotional or mental health problems now or later in life.
- > It's important to comfort children if they are afraid, and to make sure they are safe.
- > If sleep disturbances keep happening or you are worried, talk with your doctor.

### Nightmares

Nightmares are bad dreams that can upset and frighten children. They can be about imaginary things such as monsters or something real in your child's life. Young children can wake up thinking something bad has happened. As they get older they understand that dreams are not real.

Nightmares can be linked with worries and fears. They happen more often after a traumatic event or when a child is stressed, unwell, taking medication or not getting enough sleep.

**Dreams help people deal with their worries. As children become more confident in dealing with problems, they tend to have fewer nightmares.**

### What parents can do

If your child wakes from a nightmare, comfort them and make them feel safe. You could:

- > stay with them until they go back to sleep;
- > leave their bedroom door open or a night-light on;
- > try a gentle massage, cuddle, song or music CD;
- > talk with them calmly about the nightmare for a short time.

It can help to:

- > reduce daytime stress e.g. if toilet training try putting it off for a while;
- > avoid TV, computers and video games before bed. Choose only G-rated programs and games at any time;

- > have comforting, wind-down activities before bed e.g. a bath, story, and tuck into bed with a goodnight hug or kiss;
- > try getting your child to relax and think of a happy, safe place while they go to sleep;
- > try using your child's imagination. Ask them to draw what is scaring them, and then screw it up and throw it away. This can give a sense of power over fears. If your child often has the same nightmare with a scary ending, try talking during the day about a better ending.

### Night terrors

Night terrors are when a child becomes very agitated during deep sleep. They may:

- > scream suddenly or cry and look pale and scared;
- > kick and thrash about;
- > call for you but not 'see' you and cannot be comforted;
- > breathe heavily, perspire and stare with wide-open eyes.

This can last for a few minutes or up to 20 minutes.

**Night terrors may scare you but they don't harm or scare your child.**

A child having a night terror is not dreaming. They are also not awake. In the morning they will not remember what happened.



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## What parents can do

- > It's best not to wake your child from a night terror. They may be confused and take longer to settle.
- > Stay with your child even if they don't let you comfort them. Make sure they are safe. Guide them back to bed if needed.
- > Talking about it the next day may embarrass and worry your child as they will not remember what happened.
- > If the night terror happens around the same time each night, try waking your child briefly about 10–15 minutes before that time, and then settle them back to sleep.
- > Make sure your child gets enough sleep, has a relaxing bedtime routine, and goes to the toilet before bed.

## Sleepwalking

Sleepwalking is when your child walks or does some other activity while asleep. It can start when children are between three and seven years old. They will sleepwalk less as they get older. Children have no control over what they do when they sleepwalk and may hurt themselves.

## What parents can do

- > It's best not to wake your child as it can upset them. Nothing bad will happen if they do wake up. Guide your child back to bed.
- > Make sure they are safe by locking doors and windows, putting barriers across stairs, and placing heaters, electric cords and any other dangerous objects out of the way.
- > Tying a bell to your child's bedroom door can alert you when they sleepwalk.
- > Protect your child from being teased about it. Let them know that it's not a sign of any problem or illness.

## Sleep 'starts'

Sleep 'starts' or 'jerks' are sudden, usually single jerks of the arms, legs or whole body at the beginning of sleep. These are common in people of all ages and the causes are unknown.

## Sleep talking

Sleep talking is common. It is more likely if children are excited or worried about something. What they say may be clear or unclear and they may sit up when talking. They will not remember the next day. Try talking with them about their worries during the day. Sleep talking can keep others awake so you might have to change where your children sleep.

## Teeth grinding

Young children from about 10 months can grind their teeth. It usually doesn't cause any damage.

Older children can put pressure on their teeth by clenching their jaw. This can cause damage to the teeth, sore cheek muscles or headaches. Talk to your dentist if you are worried.

## Want more information?

### Child and Family Health Centres:

Phone 1300 733 606 9am–4.30pm Mon–Fri  
For an appointment at your local Centre

### Parent Helpline: Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child development and parenting

### [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

For child health and parenting information

### [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

For more Parent Easy Guides e.g. 'Sleep (0–6years)', 'Bedwetting', 'Coping skills' and 'Dealing with a crisis'

### [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

For information on raising children

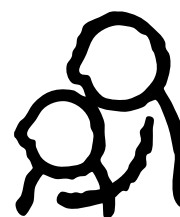
**Parenting SA**  
**Women's and Children's Health Network**  
**Telephone (08) 8303 1660**  
**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

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**Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia**

**Important:** This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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