

Nightwakings

Nightwakings in young children is one of the most common problems that parents face. By 6 months of age, most babies are physiologically capable of sleeping throughout the night and no longer require nighttime feedings. However, 25%–50% continue to awaken during the night. Nightwaking problems can occur at any age but are most common with infants and toddlers.

WHY DOES YOUR CHILD WAKE DURING THE NIGHT?

When it comes to nightwaking, the most important thing for parents to understand is that all children, no matter the age, wake briefly throughout the night. These arousals occur between four to six times per night. So the problem is rarely the waking during the night but rather why the child is unable to return to sleep on her own. Children who are able to soothe themselves back to sleep (“self-soothers”) awaken briefly throughout the night but their parents are unaware of these arousals. In contrast, “signalers” are those children who alert their parents by crying or going into the parents’ bedroom upon awakening. Many of these “signaler” children have developed inappropriate sleep-onset associations and thus have difficulty self-soothing.

WHAT ARE SLEEP ASSOCIATIONS?

Many parents develop the habit of helping their child to fall asleep by rocking, holding, or bringing the child into bed with them. Over time, children may learn to rely on this kind of help from their parents in order to fall asleep. Although this may not be a problem at bedtime, it may lead to difficulties with your child failing back to sleep on her own during the night. Thus, sleep associations are conditions that the child *learns to need* in order to fall asleep at bedtime (such as rocking, nursing, or lying next to a parent). These same sleep associations are then needed in order to *fall back to sleep* during the night. The bottom line is that your child needs to learn to fall asleep on her own so that she can put herself immediately back to sleep when she awakens.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD SLEEP THROUGH THE NIGHT?

There are a number of steps that you can take to help your child sleep through the night:

- **Develop an appropriate sleep schedule with an early bedtime.** Ironically, the more tired your child is, the more times she will awaken during the night. So be sure to have your child continue to take naps during the day and set an early bedtime.

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- **Use a nightlight.** No matter what your child is afraid of, a nightlight can help. A nightlight is fine as long as it does not prevent your child from falling asleep. Another thing to try is leaving the bedroom door open so that your child doesn't feel isolated from the rest of the family.
- **Avoid scary television shows.** Avoid scary TV shows, videos, or stories that may add to your child's fears.
- **Teach relaxation training.** Teaching your child relaxation strategies can help him relax at bedtime and fall asleep. This will give him something else to think about while lying in bed and help to distract him from his fearful thoughts. Also, it is impossible to be relaxed and scared at the same time.
- **Discuss your child's fears during the day.** Depending on how old your child is and how well he can talk, try discussing his fears during the day. Talk about how he can be less frightened at night. In addition, build his self-confidence during the day. Feeling secure throughout the day may help him feel more secure at night as well.
- **Set limits.** At the same time that you are reassuring your child, you need to set limits. Limits are necessary to prevent your child's "being scared" behavior from being reinforced. Checking closets and leaving a low nightlight on is reasonable, but sleeping with your child every night is not.
- **Have him stay in his bed.** Don't encourage your child to get out of bed. He should stay in bed and find out for himself that he really is safe so that he can learn to overcome his fears. If you bring your child into your room, or downstairs while finishing the dinner dishes, the message is that his bed isn't a safe place to be. It is a much better strategy to stay with him in *his* room than to have him join you in yours. If your child is too frightened to stay in his room alone, it is okay to *occasionally* stay by his bed until he falls asleep. Don't do this too frequently, or even for two nights in a row, because he may come to depend on your presence. If your child is anxious about your leaving, check on him frequently. Begin by briefly checking and reassuring him in 5 minutes, and then every 10 minutes until he is asleep. Similarly, if your child wakes up in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep because he is frightened, go and reassure him. Repeat the message about being safe and tell him that he will be fine. If he gets up in the middle of the night and comes into your room, take him right back and gently tuck him into bed. Reassure him again, but don't let him get up.
- **Start a star/sticker chart.** Some children receive reinforcement for their fears. They may be given lots of attention for being afraid or receive special treats. If this is the case, switch the scenario. Give your child extra attention for dealing with his fears. Tell him how proud you are of him for being brave. Set up a star system. Have him earn stars for being brave and sleeping on his own. After earning a certain number of stars, he can turn them in for a treat, such as watching a favorite video, going to the park, or baking cookies.
- **Address severe or persistent anxiety.** If your child's anxiety and fears continue, are severe, or are present during the day, consider taking him for a psychological evaluation aimed at identifying and treating anxiety.

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