

How to Cope with Nightmares



Nightmares are common childhood experiences but can be stressful events for both parents and children, especially when they occur frequently. After waking from a nightmare, children often seek support from parents by calling out or running to their room. As a parent, your first instinct is to want to soothe your child, which is perfectly understandable. Unfortunately, sometimes families can get stuck in patterns of comfort-seeking and -providing that maintain the problems and contribute to sleep difficulties. Below, we outline some ideas that might help you support your child to cope with their nightmares and anxiety *in the long run*.



What do parents usually do when their child has a nightmare?

Parents commonly adopt the following strategies:

- Asking the child to describe the nightmare.
 - “What were you dreaming about? Tell me what happened in the nightmare...”
- Reassuring the child that everything is okay.
 - “Don’t worry. There are no monsters. I can even look in the closet for you, if you like.”
- Providing extra comfort or support to return to sleep.
 - “Come crawl into bed and stay with mom and dad, we’ll keep you safe.”
 - “What do parents usually do when their child has a nightmare?”

The problem with these strategies

- When you ask your child to describe a nightmare, you risk making the memory more vivid and increasing the likelihood your child remembers the nightmare and has the same one again.
- When you focus on providing short-term comfort, you increase your child’s reliance on you for coping and miss out on building their overall skills. Over time, this can contribute to increasing challenges.

General strategies

It is rational and beneficial to provide some comfort to your child during distressing moments; however, it is best if done in ways that help children move on from the nightmare and build their capacity to cope independently.



1. Model

Manage your own anxiety in the moment and provide your child with a calm role model.

2. Reflect

Let your child know you understand what they are experiencing while helping them develop their emotional vocabulary.

- “Wow, your heart is beating fast. It seems like you’re feeling pretty nervous.”
- “I see you’re feeling afraid and that makes sense.”

3. Encourage

Help build up your child’s perception that they are capable of handling their nightmares and emotions.

- “This is tough, and I know you’re brave.”
- “The worst part is already over; you can get through this.”

4. Distract

Just as we often forget a dream by the time we’ve gotten up and out of bed, your child will more likely forget what the nightmare was about and go back to sleep if you direct their attention towards something else.

- “You’re all sweaty! Should we go to the bathroom and clean up?”
- “What should I make you for breakfast tomorrow morning?”
- “What was that joke you told me yesterday?”
- “What should we do this weekend? What would be a fun activity we could do?”

5. Cope

Direct your child toward a coping strategy they can do independently so that they have access to it in the future and will not need to rely on you.

- “Your calm breathing will help get you ready for sleep.”
- “Grab your stuffie and give him a nice big hug.”



- “Why don’t you close your eyes and imagine being a superhero.”
- “Which of your books do you want to look through before going back to sleep?”

6. Reinforce

When your child wakes the next morning, praise them for getting through something scary to encourage the idea that they can handle it again in the future.

- “I know you had a scary dream last night; I’m so proud of how you got through it.”
- “I know you wanted me to stay; I’m so impressed by how you practiced going to sleep on your own.”

Strategies for repeated nightmares

For children who have nightmares very often, particularly on consistent topics or themes, it can be helpful to address fears more directly and build their overall confidence in coping. These strategies are used during the day to increase the child’s confidence in managing the nightmare should it occur during the night.

1. Face the fear

When we watch a scary movie for the first time, it is normal for the film to bring up some anxiety. But, if we watch it over and over, the movie eventually becomes boring and does not make us afraid anymore. In the same way, helping your child face their fears without safety behaviours (e.g., reassurance, avoidance) teaches them that they can handle anxiety and what they’re afraid of can’t hurt them. For your child, this could involve gradually working toward talking, looking at, reading, writing, or drawing age-appropriate things related to the fear (e.g., looking at cartoon monsters or visiting a Halloween store).

2. Make it silly

If facing fears directly is too hard, helping your child imagine their fear as something silly can take away the power of the nightmare and increase their sense of control.



For example, you might practice drawing the monster wearing a silly outfit or imagine that instead of being lost, they are playing a game of hide and seek.

3. Support helpful thoughts

While directly providing reassurance (e.g., “nothing bad will happen”) is not generally recommended, it is useful to help your child understand that their dreams are only temporary experiences and are not connected to reality. You can do this by asking questions like:

- “Has your dream ever actually come true?”
- “You used to have nightmares about dinosaurs; do you still now?”
- “Do you feel as scared now as you did when you first woke up?”

4. Encourage coping elsewhere

Since higher general distress is associated with higher nightmare distress, supporting your child’s overall coping and well-being may also help reduce problems associated with nightmares.

SUMMARY

Remember: Emphasizing nightmares in the moment or rescuing your child from their distress risks making things worse in the long run. Instead, focus on supporting your child’s ability to move on and cope independently.

Understand: It takes time to learn something new, and things might get **worse** before they get better. Your child may not immediately use or benefit from their coping strategy and may escalate their distress to obtain the supports they are used to. Giving in can further escalate the difficulties, so stick with the plan and stay calm, consistent, and encouraging.

Find more Anxiety Canada resources [here](#). Thank you to Anxiety Canada Scientific Advisory Committee member, Dr. Robert Selles, for revising this resource in 2022.