

BAD DREAMS



Help Your Child Feel Empowered Rather than Frightened

When your child runs into your room in the night chased by bad dreams, he is frightened not only by the bad dreams, which seem utterly real to him, but also by the conviction that he is at the mercy of these dreams. This helpless feeling often makes children afraid of bedtime, with the result that children and parents miss out on much-needed sleep.

Unfortunately the advice parents are usually given – to tell the child the dream isn't "real" and to show the child that there is nothing hiding under the bed or in the closet – doesn't help and, in fact, ensures that the child will reawaken parents on a regular basis. Dreams are very real to children, and when parents try to convince them otherwise, children feel misunderstood or, worse, inadequate because they remain fearful in spite of parents' reassurances. That monster may not be under the bed now, but it could come back as soon as parents leave the room and it was certainly there before because the child "saw" it. The result is that children continue to feel terrified by their bad dreams, which sends them running into their parents' room night after night.

The solution is to help children understand that they have created their bad dreams out of anxious, angry, or disappointed feelings from the previous day. Making this connection empowers children. They start thinking of dreams as puzzles they can solve rather than as torture they must endure.

Interpreting children's dreams is not terribly difficult because children's dreams are usually fairly transparent. **Bad dreams are an attempt to deal with lingering emotional upsets.** So the best way to help a child who has had a bad dream is to explain that, "Dreams are stories we tell ourselves for a reason. We just have to understand the reason." Once children understand that they are the authors of their bad dreams, they can enthusiastically engage in connecting the dream with losses that are still bothering them. **Eventually, they can learn to make sense of dreams on their own and often are able to put themselves back to sleep without having to awaken their parents.**

Typically any experience that makes children sad, angry, or worried can cause bad dreams. Examples are everyday unpleasantness such as sibling rivalry, the flu, a spat with her, and disagreements with parents over bedtime. Or the dreams may be caused by more traumatic occurrences, such as parental divorce, a grave illness in the family, or the death of a pet. Parents are amazed to find that when they ask children what might be bothering them, children over three can usually identify a worry or loss that parents can connect with the bad dream. To illustrate, one three-year-old was

The Smart Love Approach was developed by Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D., and William J. Pieper, M.D., and is described in their book *Smart Love*. The Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool offers classes for three to six year olds, and parent and child programs for children six weeks to 36 months. Smart Love Family Services provides counseling for children and families based on the Piepers' therapeutic approach, Inner Humanism®. Parenting programs include private parent coaching, educational seminars (co-sponsored by the Intrapsychic Humanism Society), parent training and support programs, and publications. © 2019 Smart Love Family Services is an Illinois-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

devastated when he dreamt that his beloved dog was licking him in a very painful manner. He couldn't understand why his pet would want to hurt him. He ran to his parents, who asked if he could think of something upsetting that had happened that day. Their son remembered that he had fallen at school and badly skinned his leg. Once the child saw the connection he had made in the dream between the upset he had felt at the pain of the skinned knee and the discomfort of the dog's rough tongue, he laughed and said, "I knew Patsy would never hurt me!" and went back to bed happy and comfortable.

Parents are often surprised at how enthusiastically children engage in the process of connecting their bad dreams to events from the day before. Children love a puzzle and they want to feel in charge rather than victimized. This active approach to identifying the causes of bad dreams will ensure that both children and parents will get more sleep.

It is also true that children may have fewer bad dreams altogether if parents regularly ask them at bedtime if they have any leftover bothersome feelings from that day. The experience of having a caring and sympathetic ear to tell their troubles to may be all that is needed to prevent children's troubles from reappearing in disguised form in a bad dream.

The Most Helpful Responses to Children Who Have

- ✓ Do ask them at bedtime if they are bothered by something that happened that day.
- ✓ Don't try to convince them their bad dreams aren't "real."
- ✓ Do explain that they are the authors of their dreams.
- ✓ Do help them to connect the dream with upset feelings from the day before.
- ✓ Always offer a big hug and a snuggle when they come to you with a bad dream.