

# *Coping with Sleep Disturbances, Nightmares and Night Terrors*

Many children will experience difficulties with sleep, nightmares and/or night terrors. Most children will grow out of them and they will not cause any long-term harm to your child.

In many cases there may be no obvious reason why a child experiences difficulties with sleep. However, sleep disturbances, nightmares and night terrors may all be more common in children following significant life events (e.g. loss of a loved one, parental separation, bullying, change of school/home etc.) traumatic experiences, or in children who are struggling with emotional difficulties (e.g. anxiety, low mood etc.).

There are a number of things you and your child can do to manage these difficulties and this guide contains many tips that you might find helpful. Not everything in here will work for every child, therefore it is important that you try things out and work together to find out what works. To help with this, there is a sleep diary and dream journal that you may like to use to keep track of your child's progress.

If you are concerned that your child is continuing to experience difficulties, you may wish to discuss this with your GP. If you believe that your child's difficulties with sleep are linked to other emotional difficulties, or started following a loss or other significant life event, you may wish to consider contacting us for further support or guidance.

You can contact **CHUMS** on **01525 863924**

## *Sleep Disturbances*

Every child has problems sleeping at times. Often children will find it difficult to get to sleep, or may wake up in the night and find it difficult to get back to sleep. This is perfectly normal and these problems often resolve themselves after a short period of time. However, if sleep problems persist they can have an impact on your child's energy levels, mood and how much they are able to concentrate. As such, it is important to take steps to help your child to get a good night's sleep.



# Tips for a Good Night's Sleep

## Establish a Routine

Support your child to try to go to bed and get up at roughly the same time each day. By doing this, the body starts to associate times of the day with sleep. You may need to do this for several weeks to establish a regular sleep-wake cycle.

Children are more likely to struggle with sleep if they are tense or excited when going to bed. Therefore, it is important to help your child to relax before bed and to develop bed time rituals. There are many ways you can do this but you may like to encourage your child to:

- Have a bath
- Have a warm milky drink or glass of water that they take to bed
- Read a book or listen to soothing music or an audio book
- Listen to relaxation CDs

With younger children or children who are struggling to feel safe, you may also find it helpful to have some time for cuddles, to help your child to feel secure.



## Be Aware of Your Child's Diet

Research shows that what children eat and drink can have a big impact on sleep. Encourage your child to stay away from caffeinated drinks (e.g. coca cola, energy drinks, tea, coffee etc.) and sugary or spicy foods in an evening. Also, ensure that your child is not going to bed hungry as this may keep them awake.

## Think About the Environment

The bedroom should be a place that your child associates with sleep, though there are certain things that can weaken this association. These include electronic devices such as TVs, computers and mobile phones, light (or lack of light if your child is scared of the dark), noise and an uncomfortable bed.

Try to keep your child's bedroom a TV-free zone and encourage them to charge their phones and other devices downstairs/switched to sleep mode (if they have this function) so that they are not disturbed if a message comes through. Where children are reluctant to do this, you may consider setting up an experiment (e.g. let's try this for a week and see what happens).

Other steps you may take to create a relaxing environment for your child include:

- Ensuring that the bedroom is dark, quiet and tidy. However, if your child is scared of the dark, you may wish to consider using a nightlight, or leaving a light on in the hallway and leaving their door ajar.
- Making sure that their bed is comfortable and that they are not too hot or too cold. Having extra blankets that they may remove can be one way of doing this. Some children may also like to have soft toys that they can cuddle up to at night.
- Introducing soothing scents such as lavender through the use of oils or air fresheners for example.







### When Worry Interferes with Sleep

Worry can have a huge impact on sleep, with worrying thoughts often popping into a person's mind when they are trying to get to sleep or waking them up at night. If you are aware that worry is a problem for your child, you may find it helpful to:

- Encourage them to find some way of letting the worries out. Depending on the age of your child, this might mean writing them down, using worry dolls, talking to you or someone else they feel they can open up to, or finding objects to represent their worries that they may lock away in a box/bag.
- Introduce relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or body scans (you can find examples of these at <http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/relax.htm>)
- Encourage your child to play mind games (e.g. counting, imagining animals in different colours, trying to find words that rhyme with ... etc.)

## Understanding Nightmares and Night Terrors

### *Nightmares*

Nightmares can be described as intense, frightening dreams that may cause a child to wake up, sometimes leaving them feeling very scared. They may be related to events that have happened in your child's life, though the link is not always clear.

### *Night Terrors*

Night terrors are like nightmares; though often occur when your child is in a deep sleep. They may trigger a deep sense of dread, sweating and increase in heart rate and may cause your child to shout out in their sleep. Often they may have little or no memory of what happened on waking.



## Tips for Managing Nightmares and Night Terrors

### Thinking about the Environment

If your child wakes from a nightmare or night terror, they can often feel disorientated and it can take them some time to reconnect with where they are and what is happening. There are however a number of things you can do to support this. These include:

- Using a night light so that they can see on waking that they are safe in their bedroom
- Having objects around that may help them to remember where they are and make them feel safe (e.g. cuddly toys, photos of family members, a clock to check the time, their own drawings and toys etc.)
- Similarly, familiar smells may help them to identify quickly where they are, so using the same oils, air freshener, or plug ins can be helpful
- Also, it is important to be mindful of any objects that in the dark, may appear threatening or may be mistaken for something else. For example, a coat hung on the back of the door may look like a figure in the dark. Where possible, make sure these things are put away and out of sight.

### Supporting them After a Night

#### Terror or Nightmare

The best thing to do if your child is having a nightmare or night terror is to stay calm and stay with them until they calm down. Avoid interaction or intervention as long as they are safe. You may be tempted to wake your child, particularly during a night terror which can be quite frightening to watch. However, it is often not helpful to do so; your child may not recognise you and may become more agitated if you try to comfort them.

After an episode, be there to comfort your child and encourage them to use the toilet before settling them back to sleep. As far as possible, encourage them to go back to sleep in their own bed. While they may settle more quickly if they come into your room, this may inadvertently reinforce the idea that their bedroom is unsafe, and over time may make it more difficult for them to sleep in their own room.

### Re-scripting the Nightmare

Where children are able to remember their nightmares and may be experiencing the same nightmare repeatedly, it may be possible to support your child to re-script their nightmare while they are awake. General instructions for this are provided below, though you may wish to think about how to tailor this depending on your child's age, for example, getting them to draw these out/write comic strips, acting it out through play with toys etc.

- Find somewhere that your child feels safe and comfortable and approach this when they feel relaxed.
- Begin by explaining that one way of tackling bad dreams can be to create an alternative ending, one which they feel happier about. Then ask your child if this is something that they would like to do.
- If your child agrees, ask him/her to write down/draw out/talk through what happened in their nightmare. Ask them to do this a couple of times if possible to make sure that they have remembered as much as they can.
- Ask your child what they would like to change about the nightmare to make it feel better. This may involve changing the ending, bringing other people or objects into the dream to help them (e.g. super heroes or cartoon characters), changing where the dream takes place. As far as possible, let your child's imagination do the work, though you may make suggestions if they appear to struggle with this.
- Once you have got an idea of how they would like their dream to look, get them to go over this several times, until they feel confident that they can remember this. You may wish to agree with them a word, phrase or question that you can use to help them to remember the alternate ending.





# Sleep Diary



Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Mood during day (Sad 0 - 10 Happy)							
Tiredness during day (Awake 0 - 10 Very tired)							
How many naps did I take during the day?							
How many fizzy/caFFEinated drinks did I have throughout the day?							
What did I do before I went to bed?							
What time did I go to bed?							
What did I do in bed?							
How many minutes did it take me to fall asleep?							
How many times did I wake up?							
How many hours did I sleep?							
On waking up, how rested do I feel? (Tired 0 - 10 Most Rested)							

MORNING

EVENING

*Dream Journal*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Asleep: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Awake: \_\_\_\_\_

### Details:

Express your dream with a drawing: