

Your Child's Fears and Nightmares

Your child may experience fears at some point in his early years. As he grows, your child is working to make sense of his world. Your 9-month-old child may be noticing differences in people. This can make separating from you more difficult. You may have a 3-year-old who, for the first time, refuses to listen to a book or watch a video he used to enjoy. Now, the "villain" is too scary. These fears may seem silly, but they are very real to your child.

How you can help

- Develop routines or stick to the ones you have created. Your child can become more confused if his routines or limits for behavior are not clear.
- Take your child's fear seriously without making a big deal out of it. Never make fun of or ignore his fears, even if they seem silly. Instead, say something like, "The thunder is scaring you. You will be safe inside here with me."
- Help your child "play out" his fear. Pretending to go to the doctor will give him a chance to express and master fear.
- Your child may need a "security object" such as a blanket or stuffed toy that can be a source of comfort when he is afraid.
- Look at books together that tell a story of a character that overcame a fear. It is sometimes easier to talk about scary experiences when someone else is the subject.

Nightmares and night terrors

Nightmares are very scary dreams, which frighten your child. They can reflect an emotional struggle – usually quite normal – that took place during the day. When awaking from a nightmare, your child will feel genuinely afraid. He cannot be convinced that the dream was not real, but he can be made to feel secure.

- Holding him and reassuring him of your protection.
- Offering your child some ways to express "power" over the scary images such as "monster spray" (water bottle) or a remote control to "turn off" the bad dream.
- Playing along by checking under the bed or in the closet.
- Keeping a bedtime or naptime routine that is predictable to him.

Night terrors may occur as your child's sleep patterns change. He may scream, breathe fast, and cry out at night or naptime. Waking your child may add confusion to his terror. Allow him to work through the night terror and then return to sleep on his own.

Looking for more help

If your child's fear lasts longer than 6 months, interferes with his daily life, or if he has trouble making friends, talk to his health care provider.

Parents,

This information is provided to you today on behalf of a special visiting program your care provider is taking part in. If you would like to receive similar visits and learn more about how your child grows and develops, please contact your local Parents as Teachers program or call 1-866-PAT4YOU to find a program in your area, or visit our website at www.patnc.org

