

PARENT FACTSHEETS

Sleep Walking

What is it?

Nearly a third of all children will sleep walk at least once, commonly between the ages of 4-8 years. A young child may wander around the cot, whereas an older child will get up out of bed and walk around their room or the house. Younger children tend to gravitate towards a parent or light source. Even though the child is asleep they can carry out simple tasks such as setting tables, rearranging furniture or changing clothes. Some children may urinate in strange places such as cupboards or on the floor. They may have a conversation although it usually makes little sense. The child doesn't recognize anyone and although their eyes are open they often have a glazed appearance. Occasionally a child can become quite agitated and upset during an episode.

Why Do They Happen?

A child who is sleep walking is basically stuck halfway between being asleep and awake. It happens a few hours after falling asleep when the child is moving from a deep sleep to light sleep and gets stuck. They are awake enough to get out of bed, talk and have their eyes open, but they are asleep in that they do not respond to a parent trying to interact with them and have no memory of the episode in the morning. (Compare this to a nightmare where the child is fully awake after a bad dream and responds to the parent and remembers the frightening dream in the morning.) Often there is a family history of night terrors or sleep walking.

Sleep walking occurs in healthy children and usually does not indicate significant emotional or psychological problems. In the majority of cases the child will outgrow them as their sleep patterns mature

What can I do?

- Stay calm and don't touch your child unless they are going to hurt themselves
- Keep the house safe - lock windows and doors, and clear the bedroom of objects they can step on or trip over.
- Don't discuss the sleep walking episodes the next day unless your child asks. Children and siblings often become upset by your reaction and may become anxious about going to bed.
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule and adequate sleep, as overtiredness and changes in routine can precipitate events
- Episodes may become worse with illness and fevers, or if your child becomes very worried about something.
- If your child is to go away overnight or on a camp tell the caregivers about the sleep walking so they can be prepared. Give them a copy of this handout

Follow up

- Usually once your child is well, has a good sleep routine and has enough sleep, the sleep walking episodes settle down.
- Further investigations and treatment may be necessary if sleep walking episodes are
 - violent and there is a risk of injury
 - there is extreme night time disruption
 - your child is very sleepy and tired during the day.

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