

PARENT FACTSHEETS

NIGHT-TIME WORRIES

It is not unusual for some children to have night-time worries or fears. Sometimes parents will describe their child as being 'a bit of a worrier'. Helping them overcome their night-time worries teaches them skills they can use in other areas. Some children suffer from a more general anxiety which may need further treatment.

Talking about it

Younger children may say they fear the dark or monsters.

Older children may not be able to say what they are worrying about but have trouble falling asleep. They often worry about not being able to sleep and will tell you "I can't sleep". It is important not to disregard your child but at the same time you shouldn't give too much importance to irrational fears. It is important to give your child the message that you have confidence in him to deal with this. Therefore acknowledge his feelings but support him in dealing with them in a positive and independent way. It is a good idea to discuss it during the day, away from their bedtime. During the day your child is more likely to be feeling confident and can reason.

Routine

It's important to stick to your child's routine. Your child may need reassurance and support but try to avoid getting into a routine that has your child depend on you to fall asleep, such as having to lie with him, or having the child in your bed. Being firm in limit setting makes your child feel safe. It also tells him you have confidence in him to manage this. Giving in to his requests may give him the message that he is not going to be OK and that there is something to worry about.

Externalising fears

This is a way of taking your child's fears and worries and giving them to someone else to worry about, or putting them somewhere else for the night.

- 'Monster traps' are something many children and parents have found helpful. This can be talked about and set up during the day and is a way of making the child feel safe. Be creative with it.
- 'Worry box' works in the same way for older children with vague worries. They can put the worries in the box and think about them tomorrow.
- A special 'fairy' or protective 'dragon' is a way of using a child's imagination in an adaptive way. The fairy or dragon looks after them and takes away their worries. Planning this ahead of time and talking about it during the day, when they feel confident, will help them feel confident at night.

Relaxation

Even young children can learn relaxation techniques. These include breathing exercises, muscle relaxation and positive imagery (going to a happy place). This has many benefits. Concentrating on relaxation is a distraction and can stop your child worrying.

There are many physical feelings associated with worrying (i.e. breathing faster, sweaty, heart racing). Relaxation can get rid of these feelings and your child feels better able to cope. Children who are 'worriers' often have a vivid imagination. By using this to imagine a happy place when they are in bed may distract them from their worries, help them relax and fall asleep.

Other ideas

- Night-light - As long as it does not stop your child from falling asleep a dim night-light can be used.
- Security object - Let your child choose something that will help them feel safe and more relaxed at night. This might be a soft toy, mum's nightie or her pillow case.

Positive reinforcement

Children often get lots of attention for having fears or worries which may encourage the behaviour. It is important to reward children for being brave and for managing their worries. Sticker charts work well even in older children. Break the process down into different parts and reward your child for each part so that they feel they are doing well. For example, a sticker for getting into bed, staying in bed and sleeping through.

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