Nightmares and night terrors

Q. My three-and-a-half-year-old has started waking every night around the same time, and screaming. I think he’s in the middle of a nightmare. He’s really frightened, and I don’t really know what to do. Not much seems to help—often, I’ll bring him in bed with me, but that doesn’t change the situation long-range. He keeps waking up really scared. Is there any way to help him get through this?

All of us experienced nightmares at some point in our childhood. Usually, nightmares are an occasional thing. Your son probably is experiencing what they call “night terrors,” which go on night after night for a period of time, and usually entail a recurrent dream, or at least, recurrent feelings of fear.

Here’s my picture of what happens to cause nightmares, and night terrors. Your child has an acutely sensitive internal monitoring system that signals strong emotional and physical alarm at the slightest hint of danger, injury, or threat.

And because little children don’t understand yet how the world works, their minds register many situations as threatening. Their emotional alarms can go off daily. For instance, a baby might feel afraid while sitting facing the rear in her car seat, because she can’t see anyone there.

More challenging situations—going through a struggle at birth, facing a long separation from a parent, or having a scary accident—register deeper fears.
When an experience has caused fear, a child will either go very quiet and lock down his emotional system until it seems safe again, or will scream and cry with all his might. That screaming and crying serves an important purpose!

If an adult can come close, hold the child, and let him know that he’s safe now, the child will cry and thrash and keep expressing fear until the fear has been fully expressed. At that point, a child’s system is able to understand that the threat is over. He doesn’t remain afraid.

Many times, at least some of that feelings of fear stays stuck in the child’s emotional memory. The feeling lasts because at the moment the child is frightened, there isn’t the time or the support for the child to really finish expressing how frightened he became.

Parents who want to help him will try to hush his expression of fear, because we’ve all been taught that the parent is supposed to hush crying and talk (or threaten) a child out of expressing his feelings. So the feelings of fear that the child didn’t finish expressing are stashed, uncomfortably, in memory.

**these emotional memories don’t just sit there. they cause trouble.**

A child’s stored moments of fear can be kicked into play by little everyday things. A child can become afraid of having his teeth brushed, afraid to wash his hair, or afraid to go into a room by himself, as a way of signaling that he still carries fear within him.

When children are awake, they can stay one step ahead of the feelings of fear they still harbor by being active. Children who harbor big fears tend to be very active—constant activity distracts their minds from the feelings that linger under the surface.
But things like the start of school, a parent taking a business trip, a thunder storm, or a tense time in the family can easily trip the stored feelings of fear. The child distracts himself during the day, but in sleep, there’s no escaping the fact that feelings are rankling inside. The mind portrays the fear in the form of a nightmare. It weaves a story or an image with the feelings that were embedded some time ago.

**When a child wakes from nightmares crying and screaming, he’s doing exactly what he needs to do to offload his stored feelings.** Crying, trembling, perspiring, and thrashing wildly are the way children dispel the power that fear exerts in their minds. They need to scream. They need to thrash. They need to show you how desperate and terrified they feel. And they need a parent to be close to them, to hold them, and to keep them safe while they get rid of those awful fears.

**Your job, as parent, is to hold the child and be his emotional anchor.** Make sure a bit of light is in the room so he can see you if and when he opens his eyes. Put your arms around him, pull him onto your lap, or sit very close and keep him right with you. Let him move. Try to tune in to the deep feeling he is expressing, but don’t panic yourself.

He needs you to know that he’s in the middle of an emotional bad dream, and to love him and trust that the bad dream will pass. Pour your love and your confidence that all is well into him.

**What you might say while he’s wild with upset:**

“I’m right here, and I’ll keep you safe.”
“Nothing is going to happen to you. I have you in my arms. You are OK.”
“Whatever frightened you is over. It’s never going to happen again.”
“I’ll stay with you until you can tell you’re safe.”
“I am protecting you. I’m watching over you every minute.”
“If you look into my eyes, you will see that I am right here. If you can, take a look.”

**be patient**
Working through a big chunk of fear takes time. The kinder and more confident you are, the harder he will cry and thrash, but then, eventually, he’ll feel OK. The bad dream will lift. He’ll be glad to go back to sleep again. And he’ll wake up bright and cheerful in the morning.

Night terrors happen when the fear a child is trying to offload is not a small one. So the child’s mind cooks up a frightening image night after night to set up a chance to work through and be finally rid of the fear that sits so uncomfortably in his memory.

Children who have spent time in neonatal intensive care, who have had accidents, or who have been through other overwhelming experiences often have night terrors. Their instinct is to heal fully from frightening experiences, and night terrors help a child to do this difficult but liberating emotional work.

You have great power to assist your child’s emergence from old fearful experiences if you stay, listen, and guide their emotional release process. We call this kind of help Staylistening.

If it’s difficult for you to do, because your child seems so distraught, then it’s smart to find a listening partner. We parents are, understandably, saddened and sometimes frightened by our children’s raw moments. We love them so much, and, by and large, we haven’t ever taken on the job of helping someone while they face their worst fears.

It’s difficult. But a listening partnership can give a parent the emotional wherewithal to help a child heal fully from the fearful experiences he’s had.

Here’s how it can work:
My son had an accident that split his hand open when he was just a year old. We rushed him to the emergency room. My husband and I were frightened and shocked, and I’m sure seeing us so stricken added to his fear in the situation.

In the emergency room, they drugged him, strapped him to a board, and stitched him up. I was with him every moment, but the whole experience was not what you would wish for a twelve-month-old child! He cried a few times in the next few days, but he didn’t have a huge emotional reaction to the incident at the time.

When he was three years old, he began to have night terrors. For several months, he would wake screaming and fearful every single night at about 10:30 pm. I figured that he was probably finally tackling the fear from his accident, but there was no way to know for sure why he kept working so hard on fear.

He couldn’t really tell me anything while he was screaming, fighting, sweating and trembling. And when he would finish, the fear banished for the night, he would just cuddle a bit and go back to sleep. One night, he screamed so loudly that the neighbors over the back fence knocked on our door to make sure everyone was OK.

Every night, I reassured him, held him, and told him that whatever had scared him was over and it would never happen again. He would thrash and scream. It was as if he couldn’t hear or process any of the reassurance I was offering, but I knew that it was important to be his anchor, to supply a steady counterweight to his fears with my confidence that he was OK. He was fine in the mornings—the emotional episodes didn’t seem to leave any residue to taint the next day.

During this time, he had the same wildly fearful response to any tiny physical injury—any scuff on his knee, or bump on his head. When I could, I did the same, holding him and offering him a safe, close place and time to process his emotional memories of that earlier accident.

He had his terrors every night, like clockwork, until his mind finally was rid of the fear, and didn’t send up any more bad dreams. And throughout this period, a deep seriousness and watchfulness that seemed to be his personality gave way to more laughter, more sparkle, and more appetite for adventure and humor.
He began to play with more abandon, and to seek out more daring adventures. Being held and reassured through his night terrors was lifting the heavy weight of caution, and allowing him to see the world as a safer place.