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Have You Ever Witnessed A Night Terror?

November 3, 2013 By [Nicola Young](#) — 36 Comments

My husband and I were sitting watching television one evening last week, when we heard crying coming from upstairs. We looked at each other in surprise, not used to hearing anything from the children after bedtime anymore.

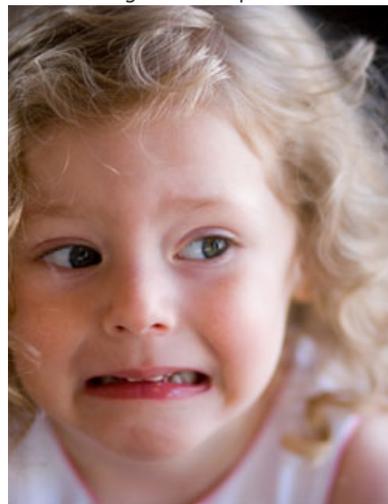
It took a few seconds for my brain to register that it *was* one of our children, before I dashed upstairs to see which one. I found my six year old daughter sat up in bed, but when I asked her what was wrong, she didn't answer me. That was when I realised that she wasn't actually awake. Even though her eyes were open, she hadn't registered that I was there. She was having a **night terror**.

- [Night terrors](#) tend to occur one to two hours after the child has gone to sleep
- They are rare, but generally affect children between the ages of four and twelve
- They can be triggered when a child has been over stimulated, is over tired, stressed, on medication or sleeping somewhere different (for example)

Night terrors are similar to sleep walking, in that the child looks awake, when in fact they are in between a state of consciousness and sleep. As with sleep walking, it is advisable not to wake the child, but to gently lay them back down and soothe them until the night terror has passed.

On this particular occasion, my daughter was quietly sobbing and her body was shaking, but I was able to soothe her through the experience and after a few minutes she stopped crying and woke up. She had no recollection what had just happened and was happy to go straight back to sleep again.

The key difference between a night terror and a nightmare is that, with a nightmare the child will wake up and cry out or come to seek comfort. They have a conscious recollection of the dream



and can often recount some or all of it back to you. A nightmare also occurs much later during the child's sleep cycle i.e. in the middle of the night. In the majority of cases, the child can be reassured and the bad dreams are a short-lived phase.

Everything I know about night terrors is from experience. My elder daughter had them for about three years, so I understand how distressing they can be (for the parents). I remember my daughter sat up in bed, screaming, with wide eyes; looking right through me as if she could see something in the distance that was scaring the living daylight out of her. Her whole body was shaking. When we tried to calm her down, it would work for a few seconds and then she would start up again.

The first time it happened I cried. What was happening to my baby? She seemed to be imagining that someone was trying to murder her. I have never seen such a scared expression on her face. Whatever she thought she could see must have been terrifying.

But there was nothing we could do until she calmed down. Then she 'woke up', looked at us as if wondering why we were in her room, lay back down and went straight to sleep again. In the morning she didn't even remember what had happened.

It is really important to note that just because your child is suffering from night terrors, this does not mean that they are psychologically damaged in any way and their mental wellbeing will **not** be affected long term. But if they are prone to having night terrors, it is important to be aware of the triggers. Ensure that there is enough relaxation time in the evenings, so that the child does not go to bed overly stimulated or tired.

Be aware of any new or stressful situations that may arise and take the time to talk through them with your child. In our elder daughter's case, the trigger was when she started school. Although she wasn't having any problems during school time, it was a new and significant event in her life, which was obviously a big step for her.

After much research and experimenting, my husband and I found that the best way to handle the night terrors was to try and prevent them from happening in the first place. We read that, if you disturb your child about an hour after they have gone to sleep, i.e. by nudging them or turning them over in bed. You change the course of their sleep cycle, knocking them out of the first stage of their REM sleep. This stops the night terror from occurring.

The research suggests that it doesn't always work, but in our case it did and it is a really good technique to try. We did this with our oldest daughter until she was around eight years old and as long as we remembered to disturb her, the night terror didn't occur.

As difficult as it was at the time, we dealt with the night terrors and now my daughter doesn't 'suffer' with them anymore. Fortunately, for our younger daughter, the night terrors are less extreme and as we know how to deal with them now, we don't have to worry so much about them this time round.

Have you had similar experiences with your children?

How did you deal with them?

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