Nightmares and night terrors:

Helping your child rest easy

Just when parents have gotten through the sleep problems of infancy and toddlerhood and are actually getting a pretty good night's sleep, the nightmare stage begins. Bad dreams, though scary for children, are normal and rarely indicate that a child has experienced something traumatic.

What causes a nightmare?

Nightmares -- scary dreams that are followed by complete awakening -- can result from a seemingly harmless event in a child's day, one that may not have noticed and certainly would not have considered frightening. Children can have nightmares in times of transition, like moving to a new home or taking a trip. They can also have bad dreams as a result of an event that disrupts their routine, such as starting preschool, the birth of a sibling or even changing sleep patterns when daylight-saving time kicks in. Certain stressful stages of childhood, like toilet training or losing a tooth, can also set off nightmares. Try to be as understanding as possible about the changes your child is going through, and tune in to signs of daily stress that may be playing out at night.

If your child has nightmares often, there are several things you can do to help lessen the severity and frequency:

Encourage your child to talk about his bad dreams. Most likely he'll remember the details, and discussing them with you can help make the nightmare less scary.

Before your child goes to bed, talk to her about images that you know are comforting for her (like having a tea party with beloved stuffed animals or flying a kite with an older sibling), suggesting that she dream about it.

Avoid television before bedtime. There are many images on TV that may not seem frightening to you but are to a child -- a robbery detailed on the evening news, previews for a new Stephen King film -- images that stick in a child's mind as he separates from you for the day and goes to bed. Instead, read a soothing bedtime story or sing a favorite song together.

Make or buy a "dream catcher," a traditional Native American object constructed from yarn and sticks to look like a spider's web. Then let your child choose small items that he feels would keep away bad dreams (a plastic spy ring, a flower) and let him glue the objects to the dream catcher. One parent I know made a "dream pillow" out of soft fabric and stuffed it with sweet-smelling dried flowers and spices for her daughter.

Night terrors: less common, but more intense

While nightmares happen in REM sleep, when dreaming is most intense, night terrors occur earlier in the night, when there is a switch from deep sleep to light sleep. During a night terror, a child often screams wildly, shakes and is difficult to wake up. This is usually more frightening for parents than it is for kids, but most of the time it's nothing to become alarmed about. Night terrors usually stop around the time a child reaches grade school. If they continue, however, or if they start to become a nightly event, this could be a sign that something more disturbing is going on, and you should contact your pediatrician.

Finally, if your child has nightmares or night terrors, give lots of hugs and reassurance, and let her cry about it. Knowing you'll always be there to provide comfort is perhaps the best sleep medicine of all.