



I once heard that young children are hardwired to dream about frightening, child-eating creatures. Apparently it's an evolutionary advantage to have had a few practise runs before being chased by a real sabre-tooth tiger. These nightmares affect 50% of children and occur most often in the 3-6 year age group. Children's brains have adapted to modern times though so instead of sabre-tooth tigers it is now monsters which haunt our young children at night since these are the threatening figures that our little ones are exposed to in books and television shows.

The ways in which your child might express their night-time fears will depend on how often they're frightened and on their age and language skills. Perhaps your child has become an expert in delaying tactics as bedtime approaches. Or does your little one start to panic as you tuck them in under the covers? Maybe you have a regular night-time visitor clambering up into your bed? My oldest child who was aged two at the time would wake screaming in the middle of every night. It was only after many months of this that we realised that her fear of sleep was a result of the monsters who visited her in her dreams, threatening to devour her.

If, as I was, you are battling your child's bedtime fears, here are ten helpful tips that I have learnt from my dual roles as a Child Psychiatrist and as an experienced monster-battling Mum:

1. Be aware of what your toddler is exposed to. Children learn so much from books and television yet don't have the experience to know what is real and what themes are made up. To make matters worse, children's movies and stories are often filled with monsters, child-eating wolves and murderous (and horribly misrepresented) step-mothers.
2. Don't ever let anyone threaten your child with "the boogeyman" coming for them. It's false and just plain mean.
3. Each bedtime engage your toddler in the same, predictable, wind-down routine to help

them manage any anticipatory anxiety they might have.

4. If it helps them to feel braver, allow your child to have a dim night-light or a torch in their bedroom.
5. It's important to acknowledge that even though monsters are not real, your toddler's fear is very real. And real fear needs to be met with real comfort, even in the middle of the night.
6. Some parents seem to have success with "magical monster repellent spray" but this option never sat well with me. I preferred to be honest with my daughter, reassuring her that monsters did not exist and that her bedroom was a safe place. Similarly, repeated checking in her cupboards or under her bed or putting signs up prohibiting monster visitors would simply have confirmed for her that she was in real danger.
7. Instead, teach your child about dreams by letting them know that dreams are just our ideas while we're asleep. Ideas cannot hurt us nor can they make something magically happen. To prove this, try playing a game with your child in which you both take turns thinking about something with your eyes closed, then open your eyes to check whether just thinking about it made it real. It can go like this: (You, with eyes closed) "An ice-cream", (open your eyes), "Shame - no ice-cream. Just thinking about it didn't make it real." After you've taken turns with this, you can try some less fun ones such as "Getting my finger caught in the door" or if your child doesn't seem too anxious, "A monster on the couch".
8. By day, storytelling is a wonderful therapeutic tool. For children who are afraid of the dark or scared of monsters, the story should aim to shift the child's attitude towards the monsters or the darkness through some event which isn't compatible with fear. An example would be telling a story which ends with your child making friends with the feared monster. The Little Children Big Dreams stories which I've developed are great for kids who are afraid of the dark or scared of monsters and can be easily personalized with your child's details. Or why not try writing your own?
9. Art is also an amazing communication tool and another great medium to help children overcome strong feelings. Having your child draw their fears for you (even if it looks like toddler-scribble) can be really helpful as you try to understand what's happening for them. Seeing the drawn version of their scary monster with you, their big brave grown-up, by their side can also help children feel braver.
10. Lastly, see through the exhaustion for the opportunity this provides. If dreams are meant to prepare your child if ever they should meet a real-life 'monster', wouldn't it be wonderful if one of the lessons they learn is that you'll be there for them joining them in battle.

Good luck and sweet dreams!