the Sleep Charity

Night terrors & nightmares

ADVICE SHEET

Night terrors and nightmares are not the same.

What is a Nightmare?

- A nightmare is **a scary dream**
- Children **wake up** and **remember it**
- Nightmares happen in the **second half of the night**
- They are **common** and **do not cause harm**

What is a Night Terror?

- A night terror happens when a child is **asleep, not dreaming**
- They may **scream, sweat,** or **move around,** but they are not awake.
- They **won't remember** it the next day.
- Night terrors usually happen **soon after falling asleep**

How to Tell the Difference

Nightmares

- Child **wakes up from a bad dream**
- Happen **later in the night**
- Child **wants comfort**
- Common in ages **3–6**
- Can be **linked to worry** or **scary TV/films**

Night Terrors

- Happen **soon after** going to sleep
- Child looks scared but is **still asleep**
- Child **doesn't want comfort**
- Lasts **a few minutes**
- Common in ages **3–8**

What to Do

Nightmares

- Comfort your child and **remind them it was just a dream**
- Talk **gently** about any worries they may have
- Don't **"check for monsters"** - it can make fears stronger
- Keep a **calm bedtime routine**
- See a **GP** if nightmares happen a lot or follow something scary or upsetting

Night Terrors

- Stay calm and **wait for it to pass**
- Only step in if your child is **unsafe**
- When terrors happen often, try waking your child **10 minutes** before they usually occur (do this for 2 weeks)
- Keep a **regular bedtime** and a **calm wind-down routine**
- Keep the bedroom **cool** (around 18°C)
- Most children **grow out** of night terrors
- Speak to your **GP** if you are worried

the national sleep helpline

03303 530 541

For more information visit
thesleepcharity.org.uk