



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Taming Nightmares

Most children have nightmares from time to time. They are particularly frightening for children five-years-old and under. Children benefit from their parent's help with these disturbing experiences. Our suggestions are based on Lucy Daniels Center clinicians' understanding of the nature of dreams and nightmares.

What is a dream?: Dreams are efforts to solve problems using the special ways of thinking and reasoning from the unconscious mind that come to the fore in sleep. Because dreams use the unconscious mind's unfamiliar language, they are mysterious, exotic and incomprehensible.

What problems do dreams solve?: Dreams solve two kinds of problems. The first are problems posed by the child's external world, which often are largely in the eyes of the child. For example: My birthday is too far away to be able to wait, or I want to be able to throw a ball as far as my brother and my dad.

If children are well loved and protected, and don't face any serious issues such as illness or loss, their major challenges will actually be from their internal world. All children experience various disturbing feelings and impulses that they hopefully come to accept as part of themselves and master.

Generally, children face the most challenges from their aggressive impulses and thoughts. They inevitably have aggression because aggression is their inevitable response to life's inevitable frustrations. Healthy emotional growth requires that children accept their aggressive thoughts and feelings and find constructive ways to manage this fundamental part of their selves.

Children work out internal challenges by turning their inner impulses and thoughts into an outer drama. This process is the basis of successful play in which children manage their inner world by playing with characters they create. It is likely that when children dream of a robber, the villain is none other than themselves. Maybe a child feels that he or she is a robber because they sometimes want to take someone else's toys or sometimes might want to rob his mother away from his father and have her all for himself! These are all natural thoughts and desires, but how is a child to know that he or she is not unique in having these thoughts to this degree – a robber among a world of good people!

This process of working out inner problems through externalization is beautifully illustrated in Maurice Sendak's classic children's tale *Where the Wild Things Are*, which begins with young Max making mischief. His mother calls him a wild thing and sends him to bed without dinner. Max sails to a place where the wild things live and tames the creatures with a magic trick, becoming king of the beasts that now romp without destroying. However, Max is lonely and wants to be where someone loves him "best of all." He gives up being king of the wild things and returns to his room where he finds his hot supper waiting.

Children understand that Max gave in to his wild aggressive side and therefore felt deserving of punishment. He was sent to bed without dinner. Alone with his wild aggressive side, he found a way to work it out. He externalized his aggressive side onto creatures that he then subdued. He was unable to confront and control his aggression directly, but needed the intermediary step of giving over his aggression to the wild creatures he created, and by proxy, controlling his aggression by controlling these representations of his own inner world. Now in control of his aggression, he was no longer as drawn to it and longed for the rewards of love from his parents. Love and forgiveness triumph over aggression. The story might as well have been a dream.

Nightmares: If *Where the Wild Things Are* were a dream, it would have been a successful one. The wild side was tamed, relationships and love prevailed. However, not all attempts to work out a problem are successful. Nightmares are dreams that fail to find a solution, and are therefore unsuccessful. The

unresolved problem haunts the dreamer, often as something out to get him or a loved one. Perhaps a child attempts to work out his or her own robber feelings by creating a dream robber, an externalized wild thing, but finds that the feelings were too strong to tame. Unlike Max, once the child having a nightmare lets the genie out of the box, he or she is unable to tame it. At least on that particular occasion.

Reassure your child: Parents should reassure their child that dreams are made up and will not happen. Parents can provide further reassurance by spending time comforting their child. It is difficult for parents to be patient in the middle of the night, but it is important that they do their best in this situation. Parents shouldn't worry that their child will become dependent or used to the comfort — children will not seek out nightmares (even if they could conjure them up on demand!) just to get some special nighttime hugs.

Be careful with questions: Some children find it hard to talk about nightmares; it is as if the telling makes it happen all over again. A child, for example, may reveal that he or she dreamed about robbers, but he or she might not want to supply details. Parents can just say that it is fine not to talk about scary nightmares.

Provide extra support: Children who are having nightmare are also communicating that they are having difficulty getting through the night in a self-protected way. Parents might consider spending more time with their child during their bedtime ritual. If the child has some special bedtime friends (comfort objects), parents could usefully spend a little extra time with them, instructing the friend(s) to keep their friend safe and warm, as they are both tucked in.

Consider possible reasons for the nightmare: There are reasons that a child's dreams are unsuccessful, and this is worth thinking about if a child is having several or more nightmares within a month or two. Perhaps there is something happening in a child's external life that is either increasing the child's anxiety or diminishing resources. Has the child started something new? Is a parent going through an emotionally difficult time? Is there family illness or another baby on the way or on the scene? Alleviating the stress from any such situation can help the nightmares.

Another possibility is that the child is experiencing internal changes. Sometimes, a child is temporarily unsure his or her footing after taking a step forward in emotional growth. Perhaps a child is expressing some concerns or worries? Encouraging communication and showing interest is always an important first step when a child is temporarily out of sync emotionally.

Nightmares are unpleasant, but they are opportunities for a child to learn that he or she can be comforted at times of great distress. If nightmares continue over a period of time or are associated with other difficulties, we would recommend consulting a qualified professional. But in all likelihood they will resolve, and a child will grow from their parent's loving concern and support.