

Chapter 4: Dreams: Some are more severe than others.

Sometimes [dreams](#) are a long way from sweet. They can, in fact, be quite the opposite—haunting, distressing, or worse. But when you or your kids have an unpleasant or scary dream, there may be times when it's hard to tell if it's actually a bad dream, a nightmare, or a night terror. Let this insider's guide on how to tell the difference come to your rescue.

Bad Dreams

A step down in intensity from nightmares, bad dreams can be disturbing. The main difference is that you're likely to continue sleeping through them. You may remember a bad dream's storyline, themes, or images right when you wake up or even later in the day, but these unpleasant dreams typically cause less emotional distress than nightmares do. Bad dreams tend to be more common than nightmares.

Nightmares

While in the midst of these vivid, frightening dreams, the dreamer usually wakes up abruptly and can describe the nightmare, often in detail. [Nightmares occur during REM sleep](#), which typically lasts longer in the early morning hours. Approximately one in four children ages five to 12 has frequent nightmares, and they are not usually cause for concern, though they may occur more often when the person feels stressed out or anxious. When a kid has a nightmare, he or she typically wants to tell his or her parents about it and gain reassurance that it was just a dream and not real. Because the child may be frightened or upset by the nightmare, he or she may have trouble going back to sleep. As a parent, you can probably relate, since adults can get nightmares, too

Night Terrors

They're like nightmares in overdrive but are much less common. Night terrors often induce terror or panic in the dreamer, causing the person to scream or shout, [sleepwalk](#), or frantically thrash around in bed. They are sometimes caused by post-traumatic stress disorder and typically occur during the non-REM stages. In contrast to a person having a nightmare, a person having a night terror will remain asleep, though he or she may appear to be awake. It's difficult to awaken someone during a night terror, so don't even try; simply wait it out. Night terrors can be distressing to witness but they don't cause harm to the dreamer and he or she is unlikely to remember the horrifying event in the morning. Night terrors are most common in kids, ages four to eight, though they can continue into adolescence or even adulthood. The good news is: Occasional night terrors usually go away on their own. But if you're losing a lot of sleep from night terrors on a regular basis or you're experiencing severe anxiety during the day, talk to a doctor.

<https://sleep.org/articles/what-is-a-night-terror/>