

## JACK'S CORNER

**QUESTION:** My four-year-old son is getting up every few nights and coming into our bedroom afraid and anxious. He is quite bright and just thinks about things so much that they scare him. He'll lie awake worrying about what bad things can happen. He needs his sleep, and my husband and I need ours. What should we do? PS: Is this what they call night terrors?

**ANSWER:** *(Your son's behavior is not what is clinically referred to as "night terrors". Also, for additional information regarding your question see Jack's Corner: "Deep Thinker".)*

Before I give you some suggestions, let me explain this behavior for other readers. Part of normal development is a child's growing awareness of the "real world" and its dangers. Around ages four to six (varying with a child's intelligence, personality type, and life experience), children go through a period of what I will call a "great awakening". This awakening or realization begins as cognitive thoughts, but quickly overflows into the affective domain (emotional).

Essentially, the realization involves the discovery (cognitive) that scary, dangerous, and bad things not only happen to others... but they could happen to me (emotional)! Often children who are bright and analytical are especially anxious and worried about the possibilities of bad things happening to them and/or their families. Common worries are: fire, tornadoes, illness, accidents, intruders, death, divorce, school, and unfamiliar situations. Nighttime is especially scary due to the darkness, the child being tired and relaxed, and the opportunity to think and imagine while being still in bed.

### **Seize this opportunity!**

1. Approach him cognitively. Show him that you can take **practical steps against fear** (e.g. lock doors, have smoke alarms, live a healthy lifestyle etc.). A bright child will appreciate pragmatic solutions. As a young male, he will appreciate action.

2. Approach him affectively. Your son will key off your mood. How do **you** handle fear? Talk with him seriously, calmly, and compassionately. **Be empathic**; don't belittle or dismiss his fears. He needs you as his ally and protector.

3. Approach him spiritually. Your son will want to know **your convictions about God, and how He protects us**. For fears that are beyond our ability to control, we Christians place our lives in the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving hands of God. We are convinced of His great good in all circumstances regardless of the outcome. Our God can take any situation and work it for good (RM 8:28). **Your son needs to see such faith-conviction in you!**

Keeping the above three overlapping approaches in mind, have a **continuing dialogue** with your son in a mood of empathy, calmness, and confidence. Develop a consistent (consistency is critical!) routine before bedtime; routine fosters security and calmness. Make certain he has been physically active (but not right before bedtime) so he is ready for bed, give him some protein, have some "snuggle time", pray with him. Eliminate any screen time or activity that over stimulates his brain right before bed.

If you choose to lie down with him, set a time limit (maybe 5-15 minutes) then smile, kiss him goodnight, and leave. Gradually shorten the time you spend in his room. At four, he needs to be able to put himself to sleep. Don't make him dependent on you; rather **equip him** to calm himself.

If he comes into your room, hug him, tell him you love him, and walk him back to his room\*. Smile, kiss him goodnight, tell him you're sure he can put himself to sleep, and leave. Reward and celebrate success! Come up with a chart where he can earn rewards after "X" number of times where he is successful at putting himself to bed. Let **him** come up with ideas (within reason) for his rewards.

Verbalize your confidence in your son; show enthusiasm! Dad might be more successful at motivating him than mom.

Again, this situation is not just a problem to solve; **it is an opportunity to build your son's confidence and trust in God.** God will do a work in you too!

\*At four-years-old, avoid letting him climb into bed with you. I know it can be incredibly attractive and easy, but the habit is hard to break. Once in a great while, if he has had a particularly vivid and terrifying dream in the middle of the night, you should walk him back to **his** room and stay until he falls asleep. Use this action sparingly!

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