



by Karen Stephens

Nightmares, Storms, and Divided Families

Most parents have questions about kids and bedtime. Here are some that have been asked of me, along with my responses. If you have similar issues, I hope this column can help you generate solutions that you and the kids can all live with.

How should I respond to my child's nightmares?

Like adults, kids can have bad dreams. And like adults, we're never quite sure what causes them. Nightmares seem to be a way of dealing with emotional conflict. It can be a stressful day at child care or an unfamiliar, scary sound outside a bedroom window.

If your child wakes from a nightmare, by all means go and reassure him or her that you are nearby and will keep them safe. Listen patiently if your child tries to describe the nightmare. Empathize with how scary and real bad dreams can seem. However, also reassure your child that the dream was a pretend story, not a real one. Use your own judgment as to what your child needs for comfort. It may be you sitting beside them on the bed or hugging them. If a dream is especially bad, sit in a nearby chair or rocker until your child dozes back to sleep. Brushing bangs from a forehead, a short rub on the back, or turning on a music box can help children relax into sleep.

If your child is prone to nightmares, it's important that he or she learn to cope with them. I know for some parents it's tempting to try to distract children. Some let children out of bed for a midnight snack or even to watch a video. But those responses can develop into an undermining habit. It's best not to let children use food or television as a coping tool for sleep.

If children's nightmares are frequently very severe and include screaming and thrashing uncontrollably — even without waking, consult your doctor. You want to rule out medical problems such as seizures.

Will it become a habit if I allow my child to come to our bed during scary storms?

Cultures vary in attitudes toward children sleeping alone or in the same room or bed as their parents. If your individual family has decided to expect your child to sleep alone, following are recommendations for helping children through scary storms.

If your child comes into your room during a storm, I believe it's a loving thing to offer the comfort of your closeness. A child wanting to climb into bed with you every night will only become a habit if you allow it to, whether it is due to a storm or not. Surviving a storm together helps build bonds and warm childhood memories. However, if coming to your bed for comfort is to be an exception, be sure to make it clear. Remind your child that after the storm he'll be back in his own bed. Once children feel safe and secure with mom and dad, they usually doze off in spite of the storm. Once the storm is over, you can carry your sleeping child back to his own bed.

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What about sleep routines in divorced families?

Consistency and predictability is hard to establish when children live in two different households, but it can be achieved if both parents work at it. I know it's almost impossible for some divorced parents to communicate in a civil manner — on almost any issue, hence the divorce; but mature parents work as a team when it comes to childrearing. If you can't talk about childrearing practices face to face, e-mail or write letters to each other. Do your best to communicate and cooperate.

Based on your child's needs, agree on a common bedtime routine goal and how to help your child achieve it. Bedtimes and routines should be as similar as possible in both households. Parents should discuss responses to challenging sleep issues so children clearly understand bedtime expectations and consequences that will be applied in both homes. Bedtime stumbling blocks in divorced households often center on where a child sleeps. It is very confusing to children if they are required to sleep alone in their own bed at one house, but are allowed to sleep in a parent's bed when at their other home.

Does being a single parent affect kids sleep habits?

It doesn't have to. Whether living with a married, partnered, or single parent, the basic recommended sleep routines apply to all kids. Most single parents I know do a fine job of bringing up their kids in healthy, sound ways.

However, emotional issues related to single parenting can affect kids' sleep habits if parents aren't disciplined in avoiding them. Divorced single parents, especially non-custodial parents, often feel they see too little of their child. Single parents who are full-time employed also struggle with those feelings. Sometimes such parents let their child sleep in their bed with them believing it makes up for lost time together.

I've also met some single parents (and some unhappily married parents) who feel lonely in bed during the night. To fend off their own loneliness, they allow children into their bed to keep them company. Lonely parents can also have a hard time setting a reasonable bedtime for children, letting kids stay up watching late night television with them. Sleeping arrangements and bedtimes that are devised to relieve a parent's temporary, emotional needs, rather than kids' needs, almost always backfire. Here's what ultimately happens. Once kids start school, parents try to enforce earlier bedtimes and kids sleeping in their own beds. But since reasonable bedtime practices weren't established in the preschool years, kids often rebel over losing what they took for granted as their late night privileges. Bedtime then becomes a huge power struggle that rocks the household every night.

Even bigger problems occur when children are kicked out of their parent's bed to make way for a parent's new adult relationship or spouse. If a parent has a succession of new relationships and kids bounce back and forth between their own bed and their parent's — well, you can imagine a child's confusion, sense of rejection, and eventual fury. Being displaced by someone else is a rude emotional awakening for little ones who don't understand the cause, and can't be expected to. Children aren't stupid; they know when they've been cast aside because they are inconvenient. Kids don't like being used any more than the rest of us. Such practices bury emotional landmines that ultimately blow in a battle of wills between parent and child.

The above situations can be avoided if parents, married or single, stay focused on the child's needs when making bedtime decisions. Kids need clarity and consistency. Wise parenting puts kids' best interests first. It requires parents to get their own emotional needs met in an appropriate manner and never at their child's expense.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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