

Night Terrors – A guide for Parents

Night terrors can be frightening to witness, and it's completely understandable to feel scared or unsure about what to do. Here's a guide to help you understand what's happening and how to support your child.

Understanding Night Terrors in Children

What Are Night Terrors?

Night terrors are a type of sleep disturbance that occur during deep non-REM sleep, usually within the first 2-3 hours after a child falls asleep.

During an episode, a child may:

- Sit up suddenly
- Cry, scream, or appear panicked
- Breathe rapidly or have a fast heart rate
- Look awake but be unresponsive
- Not recognise you

Though they're very stressful for you to witness, the child is **not awake**, and won't remember the episode in the morning. **Night terrors are not harmful.**



Night Terrors – A guide for Parents (cont.)

Why Do Night Terrors Happen?

They often occur when a child's brain becomes “stuck” between sleep stages.

Common triggers include:

- Overtiredness
- Stress or big changes (starting preschool, moving, new sibling)
- Irregular sleep schedules
- Fever
- Sleeping in a new environment

They are also more common where there is a family history of parasomnias (sleepwalking, night terrors).

What To Do During a Night Terror

The main goal is safety and calm reassurance – not waking them.

DO:

- Stay with your child
- Keep their environment safe (move objects, block falls) and apply safety measure such as stair gates if they are likely to get out of bed
- Wait patiently – episodes usually last **2-10 minutes**, sometimes longer

DON'T:

- Try to wake them (it usually doesn't work - it can confuse them and prolong an episode)
- Interact. Quietly stand nearby to ensure safety
- Shake them or physically restrain them unless necessary for safety
- Turn on bright lights or make loud noises

What To Do After the Episode

Once your child settles, they typically go back into normal sleep.

- Allow them to sleep once the episode has ended— it's beneficial
- Avoid a discussion about the event in the morning. It may worry the child and lead to bedtime resistance

Night Terrors – A guide for Parents (cont.)

Preventing Night Terrors

1. Prioritise Regular, Sufficient Sleep

This is the most powerful prevention tool

- Keep a consistent bedtime and wake time
- Create a calming bedtime routine (See Hunrosa resources)
- Avoid overtiredness

2. Reduce Stress Before Bed

- Lower stimulation in the evening (lights, screens, rough play)
- Give time for connection or comfort if they had a difficult day

3. Track the Timing

If terrors happen on a predictable schedule, you can use “**scheduled awakenings**”:

- Keep a diary and note when an episode usually begins
- Gently arouse or turn your child 15–20 minutes before that time and allow to return to sleep
- Apply for at least 2–4 weeks to see an improvement

Consider Triggers

Check for:

- Insufficient sleep
- Changes in routine such as sleeping in an unfamiliar environment
- Illness or fever
- Stressors at school/home

When to seek further help

You should seek professional guidance if:

- Episodes last **more than 30 minutes**
- Your child can hurt themselves during episodes
- Night terrors occur **multiple times a week**
- They begin suddenly in older children or teenagers
- You suspect sleep apnoea (snoring, gasping, very restless sleep)

Night terrors are typically a temporary phase, and most children outgrow them – many before their teenage years.