

Dream a Little Dream with Me

CHILDREN'S DREAMS CAN OFFER US CLUES about their current development. The father of a third grader recently talked about a memorable dream his eight-year-old had that seemed to reflect a step up in development. "In the dream, a boy offered my son a powerful ring." The dream seemed significant to them both. Afterward, Dad started noticing that his son demonstrated more confidence. "I think the dream reflected an awareness of his own growth."

Dreams open a window to a child's inner world, giving us a more rounded picture of development—a way to link what we observe on the outside with what's going on inside. Even nightmares can be a sign that children are trying to grapple with challenges on an internal level (or that an image from TV or a movie is lingering). Parents can benefit from the insights flowing from children's dreams in many ways. The goal isn't to teach children about dream symbology but for us to get a picture of some of the ways he sees himself.

How wonderful when a parent listens and validates a child's feelings from a dream rather than dismissing it as "merely imaginary." It's understandable that we want to teach children the difference between dream and reality—especially when we're woken at 3 a.m. However, dreams are real experiences for young children, and encouraging them to share what happened strengthens connections with their internal selves.

Such discussions also inform us about how children are responding to changes like moving, going to a new school or class-room, missing a loved one who's away, or divorce. Anxiety can produce adrenaline-pumping dreams that repeat themselves night after night. The dream isn't usually literally about the event. It's the essence of the dream (fear, elation, excitement) that tells us a story about how a child is feeling.

Dream specialist Alan Siegel, Ph.D. offers the example of an eight-year-old boy who was moving to a new house away from his friends. The first night in the new setting, he dreamt his buddies had been killed in an accident. He woke up afraid the dream foretold something that would happen in the future. His mom reassured him that he was probably anticipating missing his friends. As a result of the dream, Mom went to extra lengths to create ways her son could stay connected to his former playmates.

We can aid our child by trying to lessen the stress of a situation and by talking about the dream itself. Parent and child can brainstorm different endings to a scary dream, like "When the monster comes, you could tell him to go away." Encourage a child to invite happy dreams before sleep. "I'm going to sleep peacefully tonight." Bedtime is not the time to review broken rules or the alleged unkindness of a friend. All our words and activities can work toward the goal of creating an atmosphere of relaxation and safety. You might even teach your child a protective affirmation to calm herself when she's afraid. My favorite: "Love and light make fear take flight."

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