Monsters Under the Bed: Nightmares and Night Terrors
Sleep disturbances, like nightmares, are very common during the toddler years. Toddlers can have bad dreams or nightmares because of stressful life events or because of typical toddler stresses and fears, like going through toilet training. Toddlers can also experience something called night terrors, which are different from nightmares. Experts aren’t sure what causes night terrors, but lots of children have them and grow out of them. There is nothing wrong with a child who has night terrors, but it can be very disturbing to parents.

What is the difference between a night terror and a nightmare?
A nightmare is a scary dream that completely wakes up a child after she has been asleep for a while. A night terror usually happens just after a child falls into a deep sleep, during the transition from non-REM (rapid eye movement) sleep to REM sleep. Children are not really awake during night terrors, so they can be glassy-eyed and not respond to parents. A child may cry, scream, thrash about, and generally act very afraid. A night terror can last from 5 to 20 minutes at a time. The night terror ends when the child wakes up or goes back to sleep. Usually children remember nightmares the next day, but they don’t remember night terrors.

What can you do to help with nightmares and night terrors?
• **First, stay calm.** It is scary to see your child so upset, but that doesn’t mean that there is something wrong with your child.  
• **Comfort your child.** The best way to help is to hold your child gently and reassure her that everything is OK. She will probably fall back asleep with your comforting words. It may not be a good idea to feed her or take her to bed with you, because she may begin to expect that all the time.  
• **Take your child’s concerns seriously.** If she claims there is a monster under the bed, reassure her that there will never be any monster there. But create a ritual to banish the monsters (like yelling “Go away monsters — all gone”), giving your child some control over her fears.  
• **Talk with your child.** If your child remembers a bad dream the next day and wants to talk about it, it might help calm your child’s fears. If your child has a night terror, she won’t remember it, so talking won’t really help.  
• **Read a book together.** If your child remembers nightmares, there are many books to read together that may help calm her fears. Maurice Sendak’s *In The Night Kitchen*, Frances Hoban’s *Bedtime for Francis*, What Was I Scared Of? By Dr. Seuss, Creaky Old House by Linda Ashman, The Scariest Monster In The World by Lee Weatherly & Algy Craig Hall, *Sweet Dreams for Sydney* by Jean Wiley, and *Rosie and the Nightmares* by Philip Waecheter, are great children’s stories about night time.