

## ONCE UPON A NIGHTMARE

One day, you have this wonderful mellow little three year old who loves "The Three Bears" and "The Three Little Pigs" and the next night....the kid gets nightmares. screaming horrible night terrors and is awake pointing at some invisible presence in the corner of the bedroom. You're certain that it was something you read to the child that triggered this event, and you stop reading stories that might remotely bring on another episode. **WRONG THING TO DO!**

Every 3 1/2 year old goes through this "nightmare" stage, no matter how idyllic real life is. Maybe it's due to brain development or language levels, but regardless of the cause, the solution is simple: **read**. When the child tells you the "thing" has big slobbery green teeth and is going to suck out all the kid's blood, write this down, type it out as a story and let the kid illustrate it. It seems that writing and reading these monstrous stories actually *helps* the nightmare-ridden child by fostering control through a "vicarious encounter with terror" (from Bruno Bettelheim, **The Uses of Enchantment**).

Then, read that kid some stories about other kids who conquer their monsters. There's safety in numbers, you know.

**Where The Wild Things Are** by Maurice Sendak features a bestiary of horrible monsters tamed by little Max with the magic trick of "staring into their yellow eyes without blinking once."

**There's a Nightmare in My Closet** by Mercer Mayer (Dial, \$4.95) tells how a frightened child conquers the beast in the closet with a popgun.

**The Beast** by Susan Meddaugh (Clarion, \$4.95) is a tender tale of befriending the beast that everyone else wants to kill.

In **The Monster Bed**, by Jeanne Willis (Lothrop, \$16) the bedtime fear is that there is a person under the bed.

In **Harry and the Terrible Whatzit**, by Dick Gackenbach (Clarion, \$4.95) Harry conquers the beast to save his mother.

Books that preach about how safe the bedroom is, how there is nothing really there, how there is nothing to be afraid of are **no comfort** to kids in the midst of this stage of development who know there *is* something there. One of their favorite books is **My Mama Says....** by Judith Viorst (Aladdin, \$4.95) about all the mistakes mothers make, like telling the kids that there is nothing to be afraid of.

In other cultures, when a child has a nightmare he is encouraged to engage the monster to overcome it. Making your own story, with child-drawn pictures helps acknowledge the power of the child's own imagination; when it's written, drawn, and made into a book, this homemade volume is sure to be a favorite read-aloud. Each night, when you've read all the monster books, when you've revisited each horror, make it a ritual to lock all the books in the trunk of the car.

Parents have shown remarkable resourcefulness in dealing with nightmare-protection for kids: water pistols, flashlights with special colored acetate over the lens (monsters can't tolerate red), iconic pictures, even Darth Vader action figures. Whatever it takes to get your kid through the night, whatever books provide comfort and courage, that's what you need during this rough period of child development.

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