

Lifewire: More children walk in their sleep than adults

by Amy Winter

Is your child having trouble sleeping most nights? Does he or she walk, scream or wake up in a panic?

Your child is not alone when it comes to these symptoms. Parasomnias, unnecessary physical activities that happen while sleeping, were found to happen more often in children than adults, according to a study in the Feb. 1 issue of the SLEEP journal.

Dr. Thornton B.A. Mason II of The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Dr. Allan I. Pack of the University of Pennsylvania advise parents to keep track of their child's sleeping behaviors by recording when incidents occur, how they happen and whether they take place during the night or while napping. Home videos are also a good way to document unusual sleeping events.

Although several pediatric parasomnias might not be harmful, parents still need to be aware of their child's sleeping patterns. If the problem does not subside, the child needs to see a pediatrician, according to Mason and Pack. This way if it is a serious problem, the child can see a sleep therapist.

"Persistent, prominent and complex cases require physician management, aided by the appropriate use of diagnostic studies (polysomnography, expanded EEG recordings) and possible pharmacotherapy," said Mason and Pack.

Common parasomnias in children are: sleepwalking, confusional arousals and sleep terrors, according to the Web site, sleepeducation.com.

Sleepwalking, which is characterized as walking around while in a sleeping state, affects both boys and girls at a rate of 17 percent. Less than 4 percent of adults suffer with sleepwalking.

It can start when a child learns how to take his or her first steps, and reaches its highest rate of incidence between the ages of 8 and 12, according to the Web site. The behaviors in sleepwalking include: walking around while asleep, talking or yelling, performing unusual activities (climbing out a window), a confused look or aggressive behavior, according to sleepeducation.com.

Causes:

- Lack of sleep

- Stress

- Certain medications

- Fever

Confusional arousals, which affect 17 percent of children, occur after a child is awake or in the process of waking up. According to the Web site, behavior might consist of poor memory and confusion. A child might appear to be awake when he or she is actually in a state of bewilderment. An episode could last up to 40 minutes; however, it usually lasts approximately five to 15 minutes.

Although parents can become concerned when it takes their child longer to respond after sleeping, most cases are not serious. They become less prominent once the child reaches the age of 5.

Causes:

- Lack of sleep

- Obstructive sleep apnea

- Being forced to wake up

- Other sleeping disorders

Sleep terrors or "night terrors" cause children to yell during the night. "Night terrors" leave a child with a look of terror, causing heavy breathing and sweating, according to www.sleepeducation.com.

Sometimes children jump out of bed, which could leave them injured. Those experiencing sleep terrors are not easy to wake up; they usually don't reply to voices or physical touch.

Mainly based on genetics, sleep terrors occur in around 6.5 percent of children and only 2.2 percent of adults.

Causes:

- Lack of sleep

- Head injury

- Some medications

- Stress

Children can suffer from insomnia as well as parasomnias. Those with insomnia depend on parental help to fall asleep, or they don't have a consistent bedtime. Problems with bedtimes and nighttime waking affect 20 to 30 percent of children.

Children need as much sleep as possible. A tired child will have a hard time concentrating and can suffer from behavioral issues. According to sleepeducation.com, children need different amounts of sleep depending on their age group:

- Infants: 14 to 15 hours.

- Toddlers: 12 to 14 hours.

- Preschoolers: 11 to 13 hours.

- School-age children: 10 to 11 hours.

Research still continues in trying to find out why these parasomnias happen to certain children.

"The further study of parasomnias in children may help elucidate the multifactorial etiologies of these fascinating conditions, shedding light on their potential genetic bases as well as environmental contributions," said Mason and Pack.

For now, if a child consistently suffers with a parasomnia and can't sleep through the night, parents need to contact their pediatrician. This way, parents and children can sleep easier and be in a better mood in the morning.

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