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Ten Ways to Work with Kids and Their Dreams

"A dream is a wish your heart makes while you're fast asleep."
Cinderella

Developing a dream sharing practice with your children has many advantages. By showing children that their inner world is real and their imagination produces meaningful and useful information, they will not tend to discount this highly important part of themselves later in life. By learning to value their inner life and wisdom from an early age, children will grow up with their intuition and the bridge to their spiritual self intact. In contrast, children who are routinely told, "Go back to sleep. It was ONLY a dream; it's not REAL," are inadvertently trained to distrust and deny their creativity, inner voice, and connection with their deeper self. The negation of that inner world has a shaming effect and produces a kind of ineffable sadness in adulthood.

Studies show various things about the way small children dream. Dreams seem to appear after children learn to recognize objects and distill their memory of past experience. Some studies indicate that between the ages of three and five, dreams tend to be disjointed, without much of a story, and without the child appearing as a main character. This shifts between the ages of five and seven -- the child then develops greater intellectual ability and can begin symbolizing experience and relating it to him or herself. Children between ages three and seven tend to report a preponderance of nightmares. After that age, their dreams are populated by a greater host of characters, including themselves.

Talk with your kids about their dreams first thing every morning, and share one of yours.

Dreams are an intimate subject and spending time talking with your child about her dreams, and sharing some of your own, can only bring you closer and help develop a trusting rapport. Understanding the inner life of your child can help you stay abreast of her emotional and physical needs, and find a way to meet them. By monitoring the dream content of your child, you can keep an eye out for trouble spots, sense when fear is surfacing, and help her work through the issue before it becomes locked in and turns into a subconscious block she really doesn't need.

By valuing children's dreams, you help validate their creativity and self-expression, keep their imagination open and free-flowing, and encourage them to trust themselves and their own process of perception. In addition, it provides you with a handy method for a segueway into a discussion of any other topic you sense is important and timely.

So, as you wake your child in the morning, or later over a bowl of cereal, you might say, "So, what did you dream last night?" As you listen to the telling of the dream, you might say, "How did you feel when that happened?" or "You can always call for help when that happens, you

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know." You might ask a few probing questions like, "Do you think I'll be able to give you enough attention when I start my home business in the basement?" or "Does that orange-eyed monster remind you of anything or anybody in your life right now?" Your job is to help your child understand the strange dream images that show up, and to reestablish security and a sense of well-being, especially when the dream is scary. Share a dream or two of your own, along with your feelings about some of the symbols, and what you think various images might mean. Demonstrate for your child how you connect symbols to your own life.

Help your child incubate dreams at bedtime.

With small children, you might read a bedtime story. After that, you might talk to them about what they want to do in their dreams that night. Do they want to play with the characters from the bedtime story? Do they want to fly? Play with their toys? Go on an adventure with you? Have fun brainstorming with them about what's possible in their dreamworld.

Next, you might have them get clear about what they want, and phrase their request to their dreamself. Then say out loud, together, "Tonight in my dreams I want to play with my Beanie Babies!" You might say it three times, and have them take a sip of water at the end to make it official. You might also say, "OK! Let's see what dream you get in the morning! I can't wait to hear about it." If in the morning they didn't dream about Beanie Babies, listen intently to whatever dream did occur, then the next night ask them if they'd like to try dreaming about Beanie Babies again. Gentle consistency pays off.

Encourage your child to invent a dream helper or protector.

Many children's dreams are scary. It will help them to know they can control the outcome and not feel helpless in their dream world. Talk with your child about who might come to rescue her if she were in trouble. She may say, "You!" Tell her she can call you any time she needs to in her dreams and you will always come and help her. Then you might ask, "And who else protects you?" Perhaps she'll pick the family dog or cat. You might ask, "And what does Scooter look like in the dream world? Does she look the same, or does she change?" Perhaps the dream helper will be her teddy bear. Try having the child draw her special dream helpers, and have her show them in the act of protecting her.

The Senoi tribe from Malaysia, which makes dream sharing an integral part of their community life, encourages their children to confront dream monsters with the help of a protector, to actually kill the monster, and reabsorb the energy from it back into themselves. They believe any negative dream aspect can be transformed into something positive. You might try something similar with your child.

Help your child start a dream diary.

As soon as your child starts drawing, you can have him start a dream diary of his own. Show him yours, and read him a few of your dreams, then let him pick out the kind of notebook he wants to keep his dreams in. He might want to decorate it in a way that makes it his very own. At first he might just draw a picture of his dream, or of the main character in the dream, and he might dictate the story to you for you to write next to the picture. Have him make up a title for each

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dream. In time, he can write his own dreams in the journal, and even make up stories about the dreams. Encourage him to keep his dream diary and a pen right next to his bed.

Take action to connect your child's dream concerns with remedies in real life.

Very young children typically have anxiety about basic trust issues: will I be fed, picked up and held, be kept warm/cool, have my diaper changed, and be put down for naps in a consistent manner? Early nightmares might result from a visit to the doctor to get a shot or have the temperature taken, or from dealing with a strange baby-sitter. As children begin to walk and talk, their dreams may reflect themes of independence/dependence. Nightmares can result from overhearing arguments, loud noises, or from encounters with imposing strangers in the world, like the delivery man. As children begin to want more attention focused on themselves, they can have dreams based on jealousy -- "I want to kill my baby sister because Mommy isn't giving me enough attention anymore." As children grow, they begin to deal with sexual feelings and aggressive urges, and at this point their dreams may be filled with wild animals, giants, and monsters.

When, after age seven, children become more social and involved with friends, they may experience anxiety about rejection and popularity. This is also the age where performance in school begins to be measured, and doing well on tests may become a dream issue. In addition, the child may experience being bullied at school, which could translate into a nightmare. By the time a child reaches the teen years, the sleep pattern is similar to that of an adult. Dreams become quite sophisticated, and yet, because of the stresses most teenagers go through, nightmares can once again become common. Teens may stay up later and sleep longer than when they were younger due to changing hormone and melatonin levels. Dream content may revolve around the definition of new identity.

If you can be sensitive to the issues children face at different ages, you can take actions to help them feel validated and secure in their waking life. For example, if your child has a nightmare that she's going to be held underwater by one of the boys at the public pool, you might want to sign her up for swimming lessons. If she dreams about horses, let her begin riding lessons as soon as she's able. Your son's aggressiveness in his dreams might be channelled effectively into karate classes.

Make a collage with your child based on a dream.

You might try spending a few hours now and then with your child, cutting up old magazines, saving pictures in a clip file that you can later use to make dream collages. Save pictures of wild animals, cars, bicycles, monsters, flowers, trees, toys, dolls, dogs, cats, birds, fish, foods, kids doing different things, old people, adults in sunglasses, mountains, lakes, backyards, bedrooms, shoes, and schoolbuses.

Start pasting images down on a big sheet of paper with your child, perhaps in conjunction with some crayon or pencil drawings of the dream. In a short time you may find the dream begins to expand as your child takes a fancy to different images and wants to put the fire hydrant next to the picture of the St. Bernard. As the "dream" grows in complexity, you might have your child

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tell the new story that's taking shape. When you're finished, have the child tell the complete story from beginning to end, and together you can write it down on the back of the collage, or in the dream diary.

Suggest your child put on a puppet show based on a dream.

Your child and some of her friends might want to create a performance -- a skit or a puppet show -- based on their dreams. If they want help, you could show them ways to weave their dreams together into a larger storyline, and suggest costumes or puppets to make for the different characters. Acting out the dream dramas can have a positive effect on the child's psyche, helping allay fears and integrate unconscious insights. Having a group of kids enact their dreams together helps validate their inner world and collective creative process.

In a simpler version, you and your child could interact, both using hand puppets -- perhaps a different one on each hand -- to talk out the various roles spontaneously. Your child could wear a puppet representing herself and her dream helper, while you might wear puppets representing the monster and a victim of the monster. After you work the story out one way, try trading puppets and playing different roles.

Transform scary dreams with your child.

A child's nightmares are extremely vivid and with young children, there is difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality. In addition, it's thought that approximately 40 percent of children's dreams are nightmares, or night terrors. In a night terror, the child may make choking sounds, sweat, feel paralyzed, or even scream out or sit bolt upright, without remembering any dream details at all. Often the child is not scared once awake, in fact, she may not remember anything. Helping the child feel secure and safe is always a good idea anyway. If the child hasn't awakened, let her continue sleeping.

To help a child take more control over scary dreams and learn to transform nightmares, first help her create her dream protector and helper. Talk to her about how to call for help when she needs it. Second, you can talk about the frightening dream with her afterward. When she gets to the scary part, you might have her introduce an extra character. It could be her dream helper, but maybe it's one the neighbor kids, or her music teacher, or her giant stuffed gorilla in the corner. Ask her, "And then what happens?" Help her continue the dream's action, letting the fear transform into something positive and happy. You might continue on with the story, asking leading questions like, "And what did the gorilla want to eat?" "Were they going to go on a trip somewhere?" "Did your music teacher show you about any new kind of musical instrument after she blew the whistle?" By transforming the fear in the dream, then extending the dream into a bigger story, your child will be encouraged to dream in a similar way in the future.

Write a story with your child based on a dream.

You might make up a bedtime story together with your child based on a dream he had earlier in the week. He could start telling the dream and you could add in another scene. Then let him add on to what you said. Then you add more. Keep on going this way until it feels like a natural end. The next night you might take the dream from that morning and add it on to the end of the

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previous night's story and continue. One technique you can use, if you get stuck, is to suggest that your child change the dream's ending. Ask him, "What else could have happened at this point?"

Try making a little blank book by folding sheets of paper into quarters and stapling them together to make a spine. Then do a project with your child to write and illustrate the dream story you've been creating that week. Have your child think up a title for the story when it's finished and write it on the cover in big letters.

Program a creativity dream with your child.

Going a step beyond simple dream incubation, you might help your child program a creativity dream for a specific creative purpose. Together, pick a medium, like painting, sculpture, or papier mache, or a project like decorating a T-shirt, making ornaments for the Christmas tree, decorating a birthday cake, or creating a Halloween costume. Before bed, talk to your child about the idea of dreaming about the shape she'll make out of her clay, or the picture her dreamself wants her to draw with colored markers. Talk about how her dreamself probably has a great idea for a costume for trick or treating. Together, say out loud, "In the morning I'm going to remember a dream about what I want to be for Halloween this year." Repeat it three times, and have her do something physical at the end, like taking a drink of water, to make it into a little ceremony that her subconscious will remember.

In the morning, help her remember any responses she received in her dreams. If nothing pertinent came, try the same procedure again the next night. When a response does come, help her make the dream into a reality any way you can. After the dream has been made real, make sure to mention to your friends and hers, in front of her, "She got the idea for this in a dream!"

*"When you wish upon a star,
your dreams come true."
Jiminy Cricket*