When children have experienced overwhelming events, their feelings and behaviors may change for a while. For example, children's sleep patterns may change. This isn't too surprising when we think about what happens in order to go to sleep. When we go to sleep we leave behind the world that we know based on what we see, hear and feel. We enter a world of dreams and imagination where anything goes. This may be difficult for children because:

- Being alone can make a child feel less protected from dangers that lurk in the imagination.
- In the dark, a room can quickly be filled with imaginary things—not always friendly and sometimes scary.

Going to sleep and staying asleep is even more difficult when children are desperately trying to stay away from what might be in their imaginary thoughts. Sometimes children will actively resist going to sleep so that they won't have a nightmare, especially if the dream was stirred up by the recent frightening event.

Parents can get frustrated and angry when they don't understand why their child keeps stalling or refusing to go to sleep. Unfortunately, children often don't know how to tell their parents what they are thinking or feeling, especially when they are afraid of what's going on in their imaginations or unable to find right words to describe what is scary.

When kids demand to sleep in their parents' beds or in their parents' rooms, they are letting the adults know that they are having a very tough time with their fears. Especially when caregivers are exhausted themselves, sharing the bed with your frightened child may seem to make a lot of sense. While there are times when this may be the most immediately calming response, our most important job is to help our children so that they feel strong enough to sleep on their own and know that there is nothing in their own rooms that requires our physical presence and protection.

WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD:

HELP YOUR CHILD RELAX

If they are younger or wish to be held, hold them; if sobbing and breathless, help them regain control. Instruct them to breathe slowly with you. Tell them to breathe in through their nose while counting slowly to three. Then breathe out through their mouth while counting slowly to four. Breathe slowly with your child to help them relax.
GO BACK TO YOUR CHILD’S ROOM WITH HIM/HER
Tell your child that you will stay in their room for a while until he/she feels more comfortable; allow some light to come into the room without turning on all of the lights.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO TALK ABOUT THE IDEAS OR THOUGHTS THAT ARE MAKING THEM FEEL UNSAFE
Acknowledge with your child how awful it feels to be afraid, give him/her words for their experience, for example:

- "I know you are having trouble sleeping."
- “Are you feeling worried or afraid?”
- “Do you know what is making you feel worried or afraid?”
- “Do you know what the big feelings are?”

Don’t dwell on these concerns, but respond with a question about which part made your child most scared. Ask if there is a difference between what felt scary at that moment and why he/she is feeling unsafe now. Point out how and why specific dangers no longer exist, and that the ideas of danger are now coming from their imaginations, not what is in their room or the house.

SIT WITH YOUR CHILD BY HIS/HER BED FOR A FEW MINUTES
Remind your child with words and touch that he/she is safe even if he/she is feeling worried (clearly, if your child is not safe in real life then measures need to be taken to assure his/her safety).

REMIND YOUR CHILD THAT YOU WILL STAY WHILE THEY GET RELAXED
If your child is still awake, quietly tell him/her that you are leaving. If the child again protests and seems distressed, you may AGREE TO SIT FOR A FEW MORE MOMENTS or calmly tell your child that you will check in to see how she/he is feeling in a few minutes.

OFFER CUDDLY TOYS THAT YOUR YOUNGER CHILD MAY HAVE GIVEN UP
This “move backwards” will be short-lived as the child regains his/her previous sense of safety and security.

STAY CALM
This is the best way to reassure your child. You want him/her to know that you understand why he/she is afraid, but that his/her fear is not based on continued danger.

The process of sleep disruption and your child’s need for additional assistance may go on for several days. The more you can do to maintain bedtime routines, the better. The added time spent with your distressed child should be made as low-key as possible.

Revised 3/11/11