

Persistent nightmares in childhood could be linked to psychotic experiences in later adolescence

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Researchers at the University of Warwick have found a significant link between the presence of persistent nightmares in childhood and psychotic experiences in later adolescence.

In a new paper published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, a team based at the Division of Mental Health and Wellbeing at Warwick Medical School at the University of Warwick found that persistent childhood [nightmares](#) both at an early [age](#) (between 2 and 9) and at age 12 were significantly associated with new incidences of suspected or definite psychotic experiences at age 18.

The University of Warwick led team, which also included colleagues from University College London, Cardiff University, University of Bristol and Kings College London, used a sample of 4,060 individuals from a UK birth cohort. They used parental reports on the child's experience of regular nightmares between the ages of 2 and 9. They then used interviews to assess experiences of nightmares, night terrors and sleepwalking at age 12 and psychotic experiences at age 18.

At age 12, 24.9% of children reported having nightmares in the previous 6 months and 7.9% of the sample were found to be experiencing [psychotic symptoms](#). There was around twice the odds of later experiencing psychotic symptoms in those earlier reporting nightmares.

Lead author Dr Andrew Thompson, from Warwick Medical School, said: "The presence of anxiety and depressive symptoms as confounding factors in those with sleep disturbance could potentially explain the findings. Experience of stressful events has also been related to both the development of both nightmares and psychotic symptoms in late childhood and may be important."

Dr Thompson said the research could have implications for the way early nightmares and night terrors are viewed and potentially addressed by professionals or carers.

He said: "It is likely that in some individuals, nightmares and night terrors have little significance to later psychopathology. However, in individuals with additional risks such as a family psychiatric history or a past exposure to trauma by adults or peers, such sleep problems may have greater significance and may also highlight other unnoticed psychopathology or trauma."

Dr Thompson added that more work was needed, but these initial results did suggest that specific parasomnias such as persistent nightmares in children could be a potential risk indicator for the development of [psychotic experiences](#) and possibly psychotic disorder.

More information: 'Childhood sleep disturbance and risk of psychotic experiences at 18: UK birth cohort' bjp.rcpsych.org/content/bjprcp...113.144089.full.pdf

Provided by University of Warwick

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