

Dreams Help Us to Resolve Affective States

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How young children's dreams could reveal the function of the dream

Recent systematic studies (Colace, 2010; 2013; 2017; 2021) are establishing that Freud's initial observations on children's dreams were correct and can be further developed in a systematic way.

The results of these studies confirmed a high presence of clear wish-fulfillment dreams in young children. Furthermore wish-fulfillment dreams work according to three different *modi operandi*: (a) as 'compensation' for a daytime event, by representing the satisfaction of a wish or of a desired event/experience that could not be accomplished during the day (i.e., 'compensation dreams'); (b) as 'continuation' of a daytime event, by representing the continuation of a longed-for experience that was only partially satisfied during the day (i.e., 'continuation dreams'); (c) as 'anticipation' of a daytime event, by representing as accomplished a pleasant event or experience that is actually expected to occur only in the future (i.e., 'anticipation dreams').

The comprehension of adult common dreams has often been hindered by the difficulties in understanding their contents, thus key questions concerning the individual significance and functions of dreams are still open in dream research and theory. However, these same questions may be investigated by studying the simpler and more intelligible forms of dreams, that is, young children's dreams.

The majority of the wishes fulfilled in these dreams were experienced by the children during the recent daytime life (i.e., frequently in the day before the dreams) where they were associated with an intense emotional state (cheerful, surprised/excited, displeased, nostalgic, regretful, impatient) that was not fully processed and elaborated psychologically, and therefore resulted somewhat 'perturbing'. Through the fulfillment of the wish, the dream resolves the associated affective state and, in turn, allows the child to obtain emotional discharge and 'affective reestablishment' (Affective-Reestablishment – AR - Hypothesis on the function of dreams) (Colace, 2010; 2013; 2018; 2021).

These dreams operate in a way that safeguards health and psychological functioning, and let the children continue the sleep. The AR hypothesis is consistent with Freud's statement that the dream is the fulfillment of a wish, and that the function of dreams, apart from safeguarding the sleep state, is to discharge unconscious drives (i.e., Robert-Freud's safety-valve hypothesis).

The AR hypothesis is in line with the Affective Network Dysfunction Model (AND) (Nielsen & Levin 2007; Nielsen & Carr, 2017) according to which dreams normally facilitate the regulation or 'extinction' of negative emotions and emotional activation, while the jamming of this mechanism is evidenced by traumatic dreams. Furthermore, the AR hypothesis also fits in with recent studies on the role of sleep in 'dissipating' the emotional charge of recent daytime life and reducing next-day subjective emotionality (Van der Helm, & Walker, 2009; Van der Helm, Yao, Dutt, et al. 2011).

Studies on young children's dreams suggest that emotions and motivations are the stuff that dreams are made of. The findings of these studies are consistent with the psychoanalytic emphasis on the role of wishes in dreaming and on the role of the dreamer's previous-day experience in constructing the dream itself. At the same time, the studies supports Freud's intuition that children's dreams are

the easiest way to test his main assumption that dreams are a fulfillment (or attempted fulfillment) of a wish (Colace, 2010).

The strong presence of wishes in dream is consistent with Solms's neuropsychanalytic focus on the motivational activation of dreaming (Solms, 1997) and challenges those theories that deny the role of motivations in the dreaming process (on this debate see: Colace & Boag, 2015; Hobson, 2013).

Children's dreams, with their peculiar properties (i.e., direct connection with daytime experience, plainness, and understandability), appear to provide a true 'royal road' for the investigation of dream functions.

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