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Helping Children Overcome Fears

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On certain nights
When everyone’s cozy and sleeping,
All of a sudden I hear a thing in the yard.
And you know what it says as it oooooooozoos along?
It says, “Nick, I am coming to get you.”

-From Judith Viorst’s My Mama
Says There Aren’t Any Zombies,
Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures,
Demons, Monsters, Fiends,

Helping Children Overcome Fears
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All of us, even as adults, have been frightened—of snakes, spiders, strange noises, dark rooms, or death. Many of our fears are common; as adults we can easily handle or forget them. But children are not like adults:
...they cannot always distinguish fantasy from reality,
...they do not have mature reasoning skills,
...they confuse animate (living) and inanimate (non-living) objects,
...and they have not had many opportunities to cope with fears.

However, you can help your child overcome fears. By talking about fears at your child’s level of understanding you can be an invaluable source of information and comfort. Openly discussing fears will reassure your child that having fears is a very normal part of growing up.

In this publication, you will discover how children’s fears develop from birth through the preschool years and how to recognize these fears. You will also learn ways to help your child express, understand, and overcome fears. Finally, you will find two lists of books, one for parents and one for children, which will help your family understand and respond to children’s fears.

The Development of Fears in Children

Fears in childhood are normal; many are even helpful. You want your child to develop a healthy fear—or at least caution—of strangers, sharp knives, and busy highways. But you also want to help your child overcome fears of irrational or unrealistic dangers.

How can you distinguish between normal fears that almost all children experience and irrational or persistent fears that may inhibit a child’s growth toward independence? And what can you do to help your child overcome these fears?

Most childhood fears are either fears that are present at birth, developmental fears that appear at certain ages, or fears learned from parents or traumatic experiences. The first two categories of fears usually follow a general pattern that begins at birth. Not all children exhibit all of the fears mentioned below, nor do they occur at the same ages for all children. But understanding the general pattern of development of children’s fears can be a useful guide to helping children overcome them.

At birth, most infants are afraid of loud noises, sudden movements, and abrupt changes in surroundings. Almost all children grow out of these innate fears as they explore their environment and become more independent. Within the first year, infants develop fears of strangers and of separation. By seven or eight months, a child can distinguish between the familiar and the unfamiliar. For example, a child develops a memory or mental picture of mother, father, and other familiar people. When a familiar person is not present, the child may exhibit anxiety and apprehension. Distressful responses to strangers are very common from seven to fifteen months and may last a year or two.

At about three, children develop symbolic and imagined fears. According to noted psychologist
Jean Piaget, children between the ages of three and six
...sometimes confuse reality, dreams, and fantasy,
...believe that inanimate or non-living objects often have lifelike qualities,
...have inaccurate concepts of size relationships,
...lack an accurate understanding of cause and effect,
...and often perceive themselves as helpless and powerless, without effective means to control what is happening to them.
Thus, for three-year-old John, the fear of sliding down the drain with the bath water may persist until growth in reasoning skills, plus repeated experiences with baths, allow him to understand size and weight relationships. Or for five-year-old Jim, the lion he imagines under his bed at night is just as real to him as the one he sees in the zoo. Or for six-year-old Sita, an eerie tree in the back yard may take on human motives and movements. She may think it will slither into her bedroom at night and grab her with its branches.

1. Q. My six-year-old daughter seems to be frightened by television monsters. How can I convince her they are not real?
A. Even a six-year-old can begin to understand some of the technical aspects of television production. Explain that these characters are not real; they are people who are dressed up and made up and paid money to act this way. Talk about the special effects and tricks that are done with makeup and cameras to make something appear frightening. This will help your daughter distinguish between reality and fantasy and understand the “pretend” aspects of television.

Imitation may also affect a child's fears. Parents, siblings, or others a child sees frequently may be frightened of thunderstorms, spiders, or airplanes and may convey the same fears to the child. Children may also develop fears based on their own experiences. Two-year-old Mary is jostled when a dog upsets her playpen and becomes afraid of all dogs. She may even associate the dog with all furry animals and be frightened of cats, rabbits, and hamsters as well. Although fears of these kinds, like natural, developmental fears, often disappear with age, it is helpful for parents to recognize and help children overcome them.

2. Q. I cannot talk about death at all to anyone. How do I answer my son’s questions about death without conveying my fear to him?
A. It is a difficult task to confront our own feelings about death, but it is necessary before we can help children understand death. If you feel uncomfortable talking about death with your son, you might say to him, “This is hard for me to talk about. I don’t understand everything about death either. But I’ll try to answer your questions.” If this is even too difficult for you to communicate to your son, you might suggest, “Let’s ask your grandmother (or teacher or close adult friend) these questions; she can help us.”
In any case, it is important to help your son differentiate his questions and concerns from your experiences and unresolved fears about death. What is important is that your son gets answers to his questions from someone with whom he can communicate freely.

Recognizing Fears in Children
What can you do to recognize fears in your child and help him or her to overcome them? An infant may cry loudly and exhibit a startle response—arms thrust outward, body rigid—when frightened. Older children's reactions are more varied. Children may run, cling, scream, close their eyes, or freeze in panic in a frightening situation. It is easy to recognize that these children are afraid. But the child who shows an exaggerated fascination with spiders—constantly asking questions about them and always looking for them—may be just as worried as a child who exhibits obviously fearful behavior.

When does a child’s fear become so exaggerated that it prevents normal growth toward independence? Sandy may be afraid to go walking in the woods because she may see a snake. That is not unusual. But if she is afraid to go out of the house because she may see a snake in the yard or in the street, she has developed an exaggerated fear that prevents growth toward self-confidence and independence. If you suspect that your child has a persistent or maladaptive fear, talk with adults who see your child in other situations—a nursery school teacher, another parent in the neighborhood. Does your child exhibit this fear at nursery school or with playmates? Can you or other familiar adults talk with your child about the fear? If your child will not discuss his or her fears with you or another familiar adult, you may want to consult a child development specialist or pediatrician. However, most children do not need professional help with their fears. What they do need is understanding, comfort and information from their parents.
3. Q. When my son was 16 months old and asleep outside in his playpen, a butterfly landed on his cheek and badly frightened him. Now, as a 3-year-old, he still talks about the dragon that tried to eat him in his playpen that day. He’s also drawing pictures of this butterfly-dragon creature, but he always destroys the drawings.

A. Your son is using the art process to gain control over the frightening experience. On paper he is able to gain mastery over the creature and destroy it. Find a book with pictures about butterflies and discuss with your son their harmless, even beneficial, nature. Then observe real butterflies with your son. These shared experiences should eventually convince him not to feel threatened anymore.

Helping Your Child with Fears

Many fears will disappear naturally as your child’s reasoning and mental capabilities increase. Infant fears of unfamiliar people and objects disappear early. Preschool fears of imaginary creatures gradually give way to concrete, realistic concerns about school, pain, injury, illness, and death. Even some fears intense enough to be labeled as phobias disappear because of developmental growth. You can, however, help your child cope with the fears of childhood by using the following techniques:

Talk with your child about his or her fears. Communication can be a source of information, comfort, and encouragement. Do not ridicule a child by saying, “It’s silly to be afraid of the cat.” Instead, encourage the child to talk about feelings and perceptions by saying, “If you feel scared, talk to me about it.” You can also help your child by talking about your own feelings. “Yes, dark rooms sometimes frighten me, too. Here’s what I do to feel less scared.” In any case, encouraging your child to talk about sensitive subjects in general will provide an atmosphere which is conducive to talking about fears.

Give your child accurate information about fears. Do not use confusing or fear-producing explanations to establish obedience with your child. If you explain death as a long, long sleep, your child may be terrified of going to bed at night. Or saying, “You’ll have to go to the doctor and get a shot if you don’t behave” may increase your child’s fear of doctors.

Select good children’s books about fears to read with your child. Books about children’s fears can provide honest information and clarify misinformation your child may have heard. They can assure your child that he or she is not the only one experiencing fear. Your child has the opportunity to see others handling fear and to rehearse different solutions to the problem. Also, books allow your child to think and talk about the feelings of a story character when it is too painful to talk about his or her own feelings of fear. Several good children’s books about fears are listed at the end of this publication.

Use art and puppets to help your child verbalize feelings about fear. After your child paints or draws a picture or constructs a scene with playdough, ask him or her to tell you a story based on the art work. You can encourage further discussion about the fear which is now less painful because of expression through art. It is also easier for a child to voice threatening or confusing thoughts with a puppet, because it is the puppet, rather than the child, who is expressing the fear. The puppet says, “I hate doctors. They hurt me!” The puppet asks, “When is my daddy coming back? I miss him.” Particularly for the child who does not want to admit fear, puppets provide an opportunity to examine reality, rehearse solutions, express emotions, and gain mastery over the situation. This imaginative play can help a child learn to deal with a scary situation through repeated rehearsals in fantasy. The next time the scary situation is confronted for real, it will be easier to face.

Broaden your child’s range of skills for coping with fears. Help your child identify his or her potential strengths. Ask your child, “What do you think would help you when you are afraid of the dark?” Knowing that he or she has options available will make your child feel more powerful and in control over fearful situations. Play the game “What if?” with your child. “What if you got lost?” “What if it started to storm?” “What if the lights went out?” Children who realize that they are resourceful and can do something about frightening situations are better able to overcome their fears. Books which offer other suggestions for parents who want to help their children overcome fears are listed at the end of this publication.

Help your child to discover that some frightening situations can be changed. Turning on the lights when he is afraid of the dark is a way your child can control and change his environment. And while we cannot control thunderstorms or big waves at the beach, there are safety precautions we can follow to decrease risks involved in these realistic dangers.

All of us have experienced fears. As sensitive, caring parents, we want to protect our children from fearful situations. But we cannot always protect our children, nor can we keep them from being afraid. We can, however, reduce our children’s fearfulness by helping them express their fears and distinguish real from imaginary dangers. Also, we can help them become increasingly independent and confident about handling frightening situations.
References
Hyson, M. “Lobster on the sidewalk: Understanding and helping with fears.” Young Children, 1979, 34, 54-60.

Children’s Books About Fears...
These books for children ages three to eight show ways children overcome various childhood fears.

Books for Parents About Children’s Fears...
When Your Child is Afraid...

Talk with your child about the frightening situation. Let your child know that he or she can talk with you about anything—even sensitive subjects. Do not create an atmosphere in which your child feels guilty or ashamed if he or she brings up a touchy subject.

Allow your child plenty of time to talk over fears. Do not push your child into a scary situation. Forcing him or her to stay in a dark room will only intensify the fear of the dark.

Accept your child's fears, feelings, and reactions. Do not deny what your child is fearing; these fears are very real to him or her. Ridiculing or shaming children will make them hide their feelings from you.

Tell your child the truth about frightening events. "Yes, the shot needle may hurt you. So it's O.K. to yell and make faces, but you need to hold still." Do not deceive your child about stressful or frightening events. Providing information about the hospital (or death or divorce) is not harmful to your child; being deceitful is.

Involve your child in decision-making and problem-solving about frightening situations. This will enhance his or her feelings of power and competence. Ask, "What do you think would help you when you are afraid?"

Give your child books to read about other children experiencing fears. And let your child use art and puppet play to express feelings and rehearse solutions to frightening situations.

Suggest ways your child can cope with fears. "Some people who are afraid of the dark carry a flashlight or use a night light. What would make you feel better?" Do not limit your child's options for adaptive behaviors by emphasizing the negatives. "Don't cry!" "Don't act like a baby!" Instead, suggest what your child can do.