



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Is It “Normal” for Children to Be Afraid?

Fear is a normal emotion. It's nature's way of alerting us to react to danger, and helps protect us from threatening situations. The world of childhood is full of fears because a child's world is constantly expanding, and children spend a good deal of time learning to cope with the unfamiliar. Since young children's understanding of cause and effect is limited, and the lines of fantasy and reality are not easily distinguished, the world can be a confusing and frightening place.

Fears appear and disappear in an ordered, patterned fashion that is similar from child to child.

We can't eliminate all fears, and some fear may serve a useful purpose, such as fear of cars on a busy street. However, we do need to help children understand their feelings of fear. Studies show that fears appear and disappear in an ordered, patterned fashion that is similar from child to child. Each new developmental stage brings its own characteristic fears. As children age, the situations they fear change as well. Younger children typically fear loud noises, strangers, and unfamiliar objects. These fears give way to others, as children begin to develop the ability to understand their environment and become more confident in their ability to deal with it. Fear of death, the dark, ridicule, robbers, and “monsters” are typical for children from 3-6 years of age.

How Can I Help My Child Cope with His Fears?

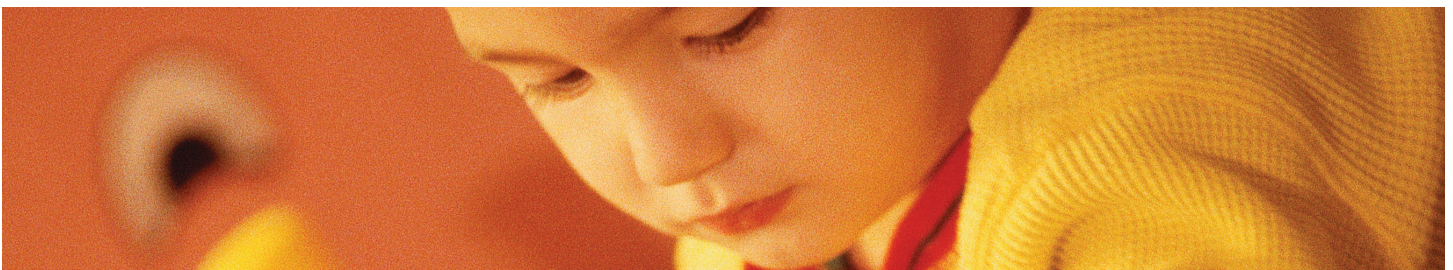
- Don't laugh at children's fears. Ridicule is a common response to fear. But laughing at fears does not decrease the fear, and only diminishes

the child's confidence. Statements such as “Don't be a sissy--big kids aren't afraid of the dark” only shame children and make them doubt their own feelings. Children (and adults) whose feelings are ridiculed soon stop sharing their feelings and experiences.

- Don't ignore children's fears. Telling your child that shots won't hurt makes her feel as though she must deal with her fear all by herself. Children may repress and never work out their fears unless they talk about them. Give your child the reassurance she needs. She may want you to listen to her account of the fearful happening more than once, and she may ask you to explain it over and over again. All of this helps to make the event less frightening and leads to mastery of the fear.

Encouraging your child to talk about the feared situation helps to make the event less frightening and leads to mastery of the fear.

- Don't force children in situations they fear. Trying to overcome a large fear all at once by using shock methods rarely works. Rather, it serves to intensify the fear. Give your child the chance to become used to the fearful situation a little at a time. If he is afraid of large dogs, let him first get acquainted with a small puppy or a gentle older dog.
- Don't lie to children about their fears. Lying to your child about a frightening situation usually produces more fear. Truthfulness and preparing for the feared situation can help your child manage it. For example, before your child goes to the hospital for an operation, take him to the hospital for a tour, read books about hospitals, talk to others who have



been to the hospital. You can teach your child how to think about fearful things in advance and how to worry (or not to worry) about new situations.

- Don't transmit personal fears to children. Children readily adopt the fears and frightened attitudes of those around them. When a parent is afraid of spiders, children sense it. Even fear and distrust of people who are different can be passed from parent to child, from generation to generation. The example you set in managing your own fears gives your child a familiar pattern of response to follow.
- Accept children's fears as real. Acknowledging "Sometimes darkness can be scary--do you want a flashlight?" lets children know it's permissible to have and to express fears.

Help your child "practice" for feared events... A feeling of some control over his reactions will help him gain self-confidence.

- Help children broaden the range of their coping skills. If children feel they have some control over the ways they react, they gain feelings of competence and self-confidence. Ask "What do you think you could do when a bee flies around you? Let the child come up with some solutions and practice the frightening experience trying out various responses. Allow children to act out fears through dramatic play. Use art materials to help children express their fears. If your child can draw a picture of a monster, the monster may be less terrifying.
- Let children see other people interact confidently with the situations they fear. Watching another child handle a pet lizard may do more than words to help your child lose his fear of reptiles.
- Adjust your expectations to your child's age. If you have appropriate developmental expectations for your child, some fears will be avoided altogether. For example, expecting a four-year-old to go on a large ferris wheel at the amusement park may well create a scary situation, while at 10 years old the child may love it.

It is important to help children learn to cope with their fears in ways that preserve their dignity and self-worth. As you help your child gradually become familiar with the unknown, her experiences in mastering the unfamiliar will give her confidence she needs to master new things rather than shrinking away from new situations.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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