

CHILDREN'S FEARS

UNDERSTANDING FEARS

Children and adults look at the world very differently. To understand a child's fear, parents must look at the world through their child's eyes. Children think in "concrete terms" and they have very little experience with the world.

Fearfulness occurs at predictable times throughout childhood. Fears crop up at periods of new and rapid learning. When a child is afraid, his body will produce adrenaline, which helps him face his fears. As a child handles his fearfulness, he learns how to contain himself and to handle the new spurt in learning.

AT BIRTH

The fear of falling is built into each newborn in the form of a reflex called the Moro reflex. When a newborn is uncovered or startled, or when she is lowered suddenly, her arms shoot out sideways and then come together as if to grasp at anything or anyone close. We are born with the ability to seek help with our fears.

FOUR-SIX WEEKS - EIGHT MONTHS AND OLDER

STRANGER ANXIETY

The relationship between parent and child is present very early in life. Because of this a child is aware of strangers very early in life. As a child passes through different learning steps in her development, stranger awareness and stranger anxiety will come to the surface. Each time she will need to be supported and encouraged to cope with and control this fear.

As your child grows, this fear may come out in anxiety or fearfulness in new situations and in play with new children. Children need to learn how to handle themselves in peer groups.



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

THREE-SIX YEARS

FEAR OF DOGS AND OTHER BITING ANIMALS

As a child learns how to handle his own behaviors, one of which may have been biting in an overwhelming situation; he may become afraid of anything that he thinks might bite (an unknown dog or animal, a new child or an adult).

FEAR OF LOUD NOISES

Fire engines, ambulances and doors slamming may cause a child to cry or cling for protection. A child has no control over these loud noises and is reminded of this loss as these noises are repeated.

FEAR OF THE DARK - OF MONSTERS, WITCHES, GHOSTS

(Images of "monsters" often come from TV!) These fears occur at a time when the child is struggling with independence. He wants to be independent, yet fears always surface at night. Dreamed-of "monsters" become fearful images projected onto the darkness. These fears occur at a time when the child is struggling with independence. He wants to be independent, yet knows he needs to be dependent on his parents.

FEAR OF HEIGHTS

Fear of jumping off of furniture or out of windows. Even some adults remain frightened of heights and of the feeling they might throw themselves off. Children become aware of the danger and realize they are independent enough to protect themselves.

FEAR OF PARENT'S DEATH

Fears about a parent's death "spill over" into school phobias or into a fear of leaving home to go to parties or on a visit. In part, these fears are due to shyness and the natural fear of being overwhelmed. This is a time when parents can assure a child that someone will be there to protect him and keep him safe.

FEAR OF STRANGERS AND OF BEING MOLESTED

The fear of strangers doing harm to a child is of great concern for parents today. A parent must carefully balance teaching a child about the dangers of strangers and allowing him to develop a relationship with new people and understanding there are people whom he can love and trust.

FEAR OF AGGRESSIVE CHILDREN

As a child gets older, "friend" relationships become increasingly important, and they become increasingly complex. The child needs to learn to relate to others from the second year on. If she is shy, let her take her time at fitting into a larger group. When she comes home, upset by having been teased, let her know that everyone needs to learn to be teased. If she can stand up to the teasing, it may not happen too often.

FEAR OF FAILURE

All children are afraid of failure. It's a natural state for all of us. This fear can be positive if it is used to move us toward success. It can also be negative if a child is overwhelmed with the fear of failure.

Let your child know you appreciate him just the way he is. Praise him for small successes. He may need less pressure to perform. Help him find activities that he can do easily and feel successful.

FEAR OF PHYSICIANS, DENTISTS AND HOSPITALS

It is important to respect your child's fear and avoid putting pressure on him. Gradually familiarize him with the necessary environments and talk about the procedures. Visit dentists' and doctors' offices and the nearby hospital even before it is necessary to go.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD COPE WITH FEARS?

1. Listen to your child and respect whatever the child tells you about his fear.
2. Help him understand that it is a natural and normal part of life to be afraid.
3. Reassure him that what now seems scary can be handled. He can overcome his fear. Here are some ways to help your child gain some control over his fear:

Let him be a "baby" again and show dependence on you. (It probably won't last long!)

Talk about your own fears at his age and what you did to overcome them.

Find time to be alone with your child to give him a chance to open up and share his feelings.

Try to discover the cause of the fear. Has the fear been caused by a real event? Has the fear been caused by a change in the family's life?

Encourage pretending play. A child may play out his fears.

Involve your child in helping to solve his own fears. You may want to ask your child "What would you do if. . .?" Help your child come up with many solutions to a problem. This may build your child's self-confidence.

WHEN YOUR CHILD FINALLY CONQUERS HIS FEAR, POINT THIS OUT TO HIM SO HE CAN LEARN FROM THIS SUCCESS. OFFER HIM WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

IF YOU FEEL YOUR CHILD'S FEAR IS OVERWHELMING, SEEK YOUR DOCTOR'S ADVICE.

HOW TO HELP WITH FEARS AND NIGHTMARES

Comfort the child and take the fears seriously, but don't add your anxiety to hers.

Look under the bed, in the closet. Let her understand that this is for her comfort, not because you recognize danger.

Firm limits on bedtime are reassuring.

A comforting lovey helps.

Help a child learn ways of comforting herself when she wakes in fear (singing, talking, making up stories, thinking pleasant thoughts). These tools will help her throughout her life.

Help a child learn "safe" aggression during the day. Model and talk about your own ways of handling aggression. (*"Ouch! You stepped on my foot! That hurts!"*)

Read fairy tales together: these encourage children to face their own fears and angry feelings. Other books like [There's a Nightmare in My Closet](#), Mercer Mayer, [Where the Wild Things Are](#), Maurice Sendak and [Much Bigger than Martin](#), Steven Kellogg, will allow a child to face and master these feelings. Handling the books and turning the pages gives a child more sense of control.