

Parents Can Help Children Learn to Manage Fears

by Sylvia W. Lee

“There’s a monster under my bed that will get me when I fall asleep!” “Make that big dog go away. It scares me!” “No, I don’t want to see Santa! I’m afraid of him!”

Children’s fears may start during their first year and may trouble all children by age six. They result from dreams, shadows, stories, television, and even overheard conversations because young children believe exactly what they see and hear.

Children’s fears may seem unreasonable and unfounded to parents. However, fears are not only normal but inevitable, reflecting personal growth and new undertakings as a child learns more about herself and her environment. Knowing this, parents can better help their children, while being more sensitive to their needs and concerns at the same time.

As a baby’s ability to distinguish between the significant people in his life increases, his first fears may arise in connection with strangers. Research has shown that around four to six weeks, most infants recognize their father and behave differently with him than the way they interact with their mothers or with strangers. Around four months, they prefer their main caregivers and people who are consistently in their daily world.

Ranging from eight to twelve months, babies are even more anxious about strange people and places because they are more aware of surroundings and of their ability to explore them more actively.

Since they are learning to crawl and navigate for themselves, they are reassured by a familiar environment. They are learning what Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, called “object permanence,” the important concept that when things or people are out of sight, they have not stopped existing.

At around one year of age, when a child is on his feet and is about to walk, change creates confusion. With his greater mobility, his awareness of “person” permanence has increased, and controlling his new environment seems to motivate a child’s fears. He wants to be the one to leave; he wants to be the one who walks away or turns his back. Not having the control to make the choices that go with: Will I walk away? Will I let my parent go? Do I want to lose this toy or don’t I? is threatening to him.

Children may wake up two or three times a night at this age because of their struggles during the day. These periods of wakefulness arise because they have not been able to come to terms with this new awareness of “person” permanence during the day, and the frustration surfaces at night.

During the second year or in the first half of the third, a child may suddenly become aware and afraid of loud noises and unexpected changes. It is important to realize that disequilibrium is at its height at the age of two to two-and-a-half, when a child is trying to decide between yes and no, go or stay, and I will or I won’t. Loud noises or sudden changes trigger an awareness in children of general confusion and their lack of control over it.

The years from two to six are years when children deal most directly with aggression.

“Children don’t believe in imaginary monsters simply for the adventure of it,” says Dr. Lee Salk, noted pediatric psychologist. “They would willingly banish them from their fantasies if possible.

“No matter how imaginary the monsters are, the feelings from which they are derived within the child are very real. Early in life, children have trouble channeling their hostile and aggressive feelings or expressing them in a socially acceptable way,” he says.

“They are left with the choice of letting these feelings come out without restraint which they cannot do without risk of hurting those they love, or transforming these feelings into bad and evil things that express those unacceptable emotions for them.

“In effect, the child is saying, it’s not me who’s doing bad and horrible things—it’s the witch or the monster who does bad, nasty things to me. In general, these fears eventually go away as a child learns to come to terms with hostility or anger.”

Fears are a child’s normal cry for help, in hopes of eliciting comfort and safety from the parents. Criticizing or making fun of the fears won’t diminish them in the child’s mind. And shaming or forcing the child to confront the feared object will only intensify her fear of it. By respecting their child’s fears, parents can assist her to gradually become accustomed to the fearful situation while still being “protected” by them. It is also important at this time to eliminate other unnecessary stresses and pressures on the child such as making an issue about toilet learning, sharing toys with a younger sibling, or thumbsucking.

In order to help a child manage his fears, parents may find that they have to face what is troubling him directly. For a baby of six months, his fear of desertion may be allayed by playing peek-a-boo, first by a parent hiding her eyes behind her hands, and then by hiding herself behind the door. The quick reappearances help a child have faith that his parent will always come back. Parents also need to be very honest with their child. Even before he can talk, a child needs to be told when parents are going out and where, who will be staying with him, and when they’ll be back, using the same conversational tone of voice that they would use for a much older child. Parents shouldn’t say they’ll be back in a few minutes when they know they won’t.

If a child is worried about dogs, she may need to be told more about them. To know that dogs bark because they want to say “Hello” as well as “Keep away!” is helpful to her. You might say, “Let’s learn about dogs together. Let’s observe what the dog is trying to say. Is it wagging its tail? Is it baring its teeth?”

The fears will probably not disappear once a child has acquired some information about the fearful object, but he needs to know that it is *okay* to feel frightened, and more importantly, that he *can* handle his fears.

Overreaction on the parents’ part may be a danger. If parents think that fears are just the tip of the iceberg, that there is a deeper disturbance in their child, they may lose confidence in her when she needs their confidence the most. Inadvertently, parents may reinforce the fears when they take them more seriously than they deserve. Since this may be the result when their child’s fears remind them of their own, it’s important for parents to take another look at themselves and ask, “Why is it so troubling to me when my child is frightened this way?” If, however, they can meet her fears with understanding and sympathy, explaining the reality of them in a comforting way, she may be reassured. “It is important for parents to realize at this point,” says Dr. T. Berry

Brazelton, noted pediatrician, “that their responsibility is not so much to rid their child of this struggle as to be an anchor for her.”

If parents feel their child’s fears stem from intense internal conflicts or pressure that the child is experiencing, they may not discipline him in the usual manner. This can only make the situation worse. Parents need to continue to provide their child with the security of everyday limits because inevitably, only *he* can resolve his fears and he’ll be able to do the job better knowing that he has his parents’ support. As children learn to manage their fears, they realize the world is not a terrifying place in which they are powerless, helpless victims.

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