



Children and Fear

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When babies enter the world, parents are most often elated and filled with images of happy, well-adjusted children. But children occasionally run into problems, and sometimes their fears are the root of these problems.

Infant Anxiety and Fear

It is normal for infants to experience anxiety when separated from parents, especially when they are around 8, 13, 18 and 24 months of age. Children must gradually learn that when parents leave, they *do* return. This is a major step in infant intellectual development. It does *not* make you a horrible parent if your child cries as you leave! Playing peek-a-boo is one way to get an infant used to a parent vanishing. The infant eventually learns to move the item you use to cover your face to bring you back.

Infants have three basic inborn fears: sudden motion, loud or abrupt noises, and sudden approach. Toddlers and preschoolers gradually outgrow these as they learn to interpret their environment and to develop a sense of trust. But as they grow older they will experience other kinds of fears. Parents need to understand that most fears are usually outgrown.

Common Fears

As a child grows, different fears may be noticed at different times. Some are very specific to an age, such as fear of falling for the 1-year-old. A bad experience falling as the child begins to walk may affect future attempts to walk.

Fears have a variety of symptoms, ranging from loud crying to nightmares to a withdrawal from certain activities. For example, bedtime fear might be apparent with an increase in nightmares. A fear of rejection might result in a withdrawal from activities and people. Fears can be found at a variety of ages, including adulthood.

Fluid and Fixed Fears

Researchers distinguish between fluid and fixed fears. A fluid fear is one that comes and goes. If the fear changes from week to week or remains for a limited period and begins to fade away, it can be considered normal. A fixed fear is one that remains or may even intensify. Fixed fears may require a lot of patience to work through and may even require special attention from a professional.

Key Contributors to Fear

What factors contribute to children's early fears? Two key factors to consider are *maturity level* and *emotional susceptibility*.

Research shows that 25 percent of fears in 2-year-olds were caused by loud noises, while only 3 percent of 12-year-olds had these fears. Children outgrow some fears but become more emotionally susceptible to others. For example, fear of strangers may decline as a fear of monsters rises.

Ages 2 to 4

A 2-year-old is better organized and more secure than an infant. A 2-year-old may fear the dark, a bath, thunder and lightning, toilet training, loud noises, animals, doctors, strangers or separation. Three-year-olds may continue this list and add a fear of animals or people with unusual appearances. Four-year-olds may add the fear of loss of a parent or loss of control.

Age 5

Between ages 4 and 5 children are often unpredictable in their behavior, but 5 is not a real fear-filled age. At this age, children's fears become more concrete or real. They fear such things as bodily harm, falling, dogs, dark, death, and mom or dad not returning home.



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Children's Fears

	6MO	8MO	YR1	YR2	YR3	YR4	YR5	YR6	YR7	YR8	YR9	YR10	YR11	YR12	YR13	YR14	YR15	YR16
Separation anxiety		X	X	X					X									
Stranger anxiety	X																	
Fear of noises			X			X	X											
Fear of falling		X	X															
Fear of animals			X		X	X	X	X	X				X	X				
Fear due to inconsistent discipline				X														
Fear due to toilet training				X	X													
Fear of bath			X	X														
Fear of bedtime				X	X	X												
Fear of doctor			X	X						X								
Fear of monsters and ghosts					X	X	X	X	X									
Fear of bed wetting					X	X												
Fear of crippled people					X	X												
Fear of getting lost							X											
Fear of going to day care				X			X	X										
Fear of loss of parent						X	X		X									
Fear of death						X	X	X										
Fear of injury							X	X		X						X	X	X
Fear of being late to school									X									
Fear of social rejection										X								
Fear of criticism										X								
Fear of new situations										X								
Fear of adoption										X								
Fear of burglars										X							X	
Fear of kidnapping														X		X	X	
Fear of being alone in the dark													X	X			X	X
Fear of injections													X			X	X	
Fear of heights														X	X	X	X	
Fear of terrorism															X	X	X	
Fear of plane or car crashes																X	X	
Fear of sexual relations															X	X		
Fear of drug use															X	X		
Fear of public speaking															X	X	X	
Fear of school performance															X	X	X	
Fear of crowds															X	X	X	
Fear of gossip															X	X	X	
Fear of divorce						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Fear of personal danger									X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Fear of war										X	X	X	X	X	X	X		

Death

Death is considered simply a separation by a child younger than 5. For a child around age 5, death becomes more personal: death is someone who carries others off. When a child understands death isn't just sleeping, he will ask, "Will I die?" At that time he has a sense of vulnerability.

A parent needs to answer honestly and directly, assuring him that he need not be overly concerned. Use your moral and religious beliefs. Do not generalize that old people just die. Ask what the child is feeling inside and let her know she did not cause the death. A pet's death is often a child's first loss experience. Set the tone for honesty, and allow the child to express her feelings.

Encourage questions, and don't be embarrassed by children's candid comments. Express what you are feeling in terms they will understand. Avoid euphemisms and statements such as, "Grandpa is in a deep sleep," or "was laid to rest." This is confusing to children. Be honest. "Grandpa died because his heart stopped beating." "Susie died because the seat belt was not used and her body was badly hurt in the car crash."

Funerals

If a child is going to the funeral, simply say you are going to say goodbye. Inform the child that many people will be sad and will be missing the person, so people may be crying and that's OK. A child under age 5 should not be expected to understand or behave appropriately at funerals.

Beyond Age 5

The list of fears remains an important guide after age 5. The child now has a more concrete intellectual capacity. This means he can begin to determine what is real and what is not. When a child is young it is important to lay the groundwork for responding to his fears in a positive, supporting manner. This positive and supportive approach will continue to help the child face many situations throughout his development.

School-age children are beginning to realize that they can work through fears or learn to cope in positive ways. They recognize that they will outgrow them and that fears do not have to immobilize them. Call on your children to use their strengths to deal with fears. Once they have this sense of mastery, they can recall it for assistance in mastering new territory.

Beyond Childhood

The number one fear of adults, teens and older children is the fear of public speaking. This may develop for a number of reasons and may be difficult to eliminate, but most adults *can* master it if they have learned at a young age to face their fears directly.

According to Schachter & McCauley, people's most common fears are:

public speaking	being alone	open wounds, blood
making mistakes	darkness	police
failure	dentists	dogs
disapproval	injections	spiders
rejection	hospitals	deformed people
angry people	taking tests	

Parent Reminders

Some key points for parents to consider:

1. Respect your child's fears.
2. Understand that your child will outgrow most fears.
3. Allow your child to gradually work through the fear.
4. Understand fears in relation to your child's personality.
5. Be aware of the variety of fears children experience at different ages.

Become familiar with information about children's fears and learn to gently guide your children through these fears. This will provide a supportive and safe foundation for your children as they grow.

Extensive Separation

If children are separated from their parents for a long time—for instance due to hospitalization, death or divorce—*anxiety can lead to childhood depression.* Children need continued, caring relationships in familiar surroundings. If circumstances force separation in your family, consulting with a pediatrician or child/family therapist would be helpful. Such separations can lead to guilt feelings for the parents, but if dealt with early most can be successfully managed.

Strangers

Stranger anxiety is a related issue. A child who develops an attachment to a parent or significant family member may show stronger anxiety toward unknown people or even toward a grandparent who is infrequently visited. This does not mean the child doesn't like Grandma or Grandpa. It means the child feels safe with some people and needs more time to slowly accept others. Stranger anxiety is normal for a developing and loved child. Around 8 to 10 months of age the child is learning that objects and people are different from herself. Out of sight is no longer out of mind since she remembers faces.

Inconsistent Discipline

When parents approach discipline differently, children often become confused. Anxiety over or fear of inconsistent discipline can develop with age and can be the root of many other fears, such as fear of rejection. Children might be fearful of bad actions. The misbehavior may be an expression of anger and frustration with the inconsistency.

Parents need to establish rules and enforce them together. The natural and logical consequences must be followed through. Children need a warning and many reminders. If children are out of control, let them know this is not acceptable behavior and give them limited alternatives from which to choose. The problem of inconsistent discipline is an important issue in blended families where children are exposed to two sets of household rules.

Discipline Without Fear

Children need to learn the complex human skills of getting along with others and expressing strong feelings in acceptable ways. They are likely to make mistakes.

Discipline should be viewed from a guidance approach which helps them learn from these mistakes without embarrassment, ridicule, pain or punishment. Parents need to make positive suggestions and explain expectations rather than simply say, "Don't," or "No."

If a child is ridiculed or given strong "no" messages without an explanation, the child might become fearful of the parent's reactions to the mistakes. A child needs to be told often and allowed to try again.

An example of discipline without fear would be to repeatedly explain the situation to the child: "When you climb on top the piano, I get very worried you could fall and get hurt. A piano is not a toy. Please do not climb on the piano again."

If a parent *only* says, "No," or "Don't you know better?" or "I thought I told you..." the child has not had any guidance as to what is acceptable and why.

Older children may not need things repeated as often or in as much detail.

Children learn that there are reasons for following rules and that they can openly talk to you, instead of learning to fear your anger or unclear messages.

Overprotection

Many news headlines bring attention to the need to take precautions and to instruct children about a variety of safety-related issues. Be calm and honest, but do not overprotect. A 5-year-old should not have to be escorted to the playmate two doors down in the middle of the afternoon unless there has been an obvious and recent incident that threatens the child's safety.

Children who are overly cautioned and protected can be made to feel anxious and fearful of their environment. They may have a difficult time developing a sense of independence and self-confidence.

For example, a child who is age 7 may be overly cautioned about safety issues and later be anxious about riding his bike in the neighborhood. This can escalate to higher anxiety in any new behavior involving risk. A more common problem is the child who, as a preschooler, is severely cautioned about staying close by at the shopping mall without being told why and as a result later has difficulty going to kindergarten and riding a bus alone.

If you are unaware of how to send clear messages to your child regarding safety issues, consult your local parenting professionals, your child's school counselor or the resources listed.

Resources

There are several books available for parents concerned about a specific fear-related issue for their child and several available for the child dealing with these issues. A book called *When Your Child is Afraid*, by Dr. Robert Schachter and Carole Spearin McCauley, is an excellent resource on fears of children. It is published by Fireside, 1988, for \$8.95 in paperback.

A listing of books for children from Family Information Services includes:

Beware the Dragon by Sarah Wilson, 1985, Harper and Row. (A town avoids and fears the dragons until they learn the dragons are lonesome and want to play. Now they play together.)

Island of Scog by Steve Kellog, 1973, Dial Publishing. (A small band of mice is terrified by an unknown monster who turns out to be a harmless scog who is terrified of them!)

Clyde Monster by Robert Crowe, 1976, Dutton Publishing. (Clyde is afraid to go to sleep because of the humans who might get him in the dark.)

Jim Meets the Thing by Miriam Cohen, 1981, Green Willow Publishing. (Jim, a first grader, is afraid of the TV monster, The Thing. He envies classmates as they enjoy watching, but is the only one with enough courage to remove a "real" thing from a child, a praying mantis.)

Spiders in the Fruit Cellar by Barbara Joosse, 1983, Knopf Publishing. (Elizabeth panics when she attempts to retrieve a jar of fruit. Her mom validates her feelings, notes her bravery, helps clean up and openly discusses the fear.) An excellent example of open communication needed to dispel fears.

Foolish Rabbit's Big Mistake by Ed Young, Putnam Publishing. (Animals fear the earth is breaking apart.)

About Phobias by Sara Stein, 1979, Walker and Company Publishing. (This book is non-fiction. It has large print to be read to the child and small print notes for adults to assist in discussion.) This one is suitable to a variety of ages.

Alfi and the Dark by Sally Miles, 1988, Chronicle Books. (This book is notable because the dark which Alfi fears is represented as a being with whom Alfi, in the course of the story, becomes friends.)

Children *can* learn to deal with fears successfully. According to Schachter and McCauley in *When Your Child is Afraid*, "Some fears are real and sensible such as fear of heights, dark streets and toothy animals. Others are just false evidence appearing real."

You can guide your children to realize the difference between the two and help them master their fears. The process is very important and requires patience, gentleness and open communication.



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