

## Fear and anxiety - children

Parents teach their children to be fearful and cautious of specific dangers, such as fire or crossing the road. In these instances, anxiety can be useful, because it helps protect the child from harm. However, children can be fearful of situations or objects that adults don't consider threatening.

The sources of fear may change as the child matures; for example, a fear of the dark or monsters under the bed may give way to fears of burglary or violence. Tactics that don't work include teasing the child for being afraid or forcing them to confront fearful situations.

Helping the child to deal with fear includes taking their feelings seriously, encouraging them to talk about their anxieties, telling them the facts and giving them the opportunity to confront their fears at their own pace and with your support.

### Common fears for babies

Once a baby has reached six or seven months of age, they have formed strong attachments to their parents or caregivers. Separation from their 'special people', even for short periods of time, can cause considerable anxiety and plenty of crying. Similarly, many babies prefer the exclusive company of their special people to such an extent that they develop a fear of strangers for a while. Babies grow out of this phase with time.

Suggestions for helping your baby cope with 'separation anxiety' and fear of strangers includes:

- Whenever possible at home, if the baby gets upset when you leave, take your baby with you from room to room or talk to them when you are out of sight.
- Tell your baby when you are leaving the room (or going out) and announce your arrival when you come back. This helps them to trust you.
- Allow your baby to get to know new people from the safety of your lap. Let them see that you know the new person is OK.
- If your baby is anxious, reassure them with a calm and confident expression.
- Leaving your baby to 'cry it out' will only heighten their anxiety.

### Common fears for toddlers

Children aged around two to three years are only just starting to learn how to cope with their strong feelings, such as anger. A common fear for a toddler is that they will be overwhelmed by powerful emotions. Toddlers have a limited understanding of size and may develop seemingly irrational fears, such as falling down the plughole or toilet.

Suggestions for helping your toddler include:

- Encourage your child to talk about their fears and anxieties.
- Appreciate that fears like falling down the plughole feel genuine to the child, because young children don't yet understand about size and space.
- Don't force the child to confront their object of fear, because this may make things worse. Help them to get used to it slowly.
- Accept that you may have to help your child to avoid the feared object for a while.

### Common fears for children of primary school age

As a child learns more about the world, the list of things they fear tends to grow. Some fears are real and some are imaginary. Common fears include fear of the dark, burglary, war, death, separation or divorce of their parents, and supernatural beings (such as ghosts and monsters).

Suggestions for helping your child include:

- Let your child know that you take their fears seriously.
- Give your child truthful information on topics such as death or war, and let them know you are willing to answer any questions.
- Encourage your child to confront the object of their fear, such as dogs, one step at a time at their own pace. For example, perhaps start with pictures, then try a very small gentle dog that is tied up, so the child decides how close to get.
- Allow your child some control. For example, if they are afraid of intruders, make shutting and locking their bedroom window one of their night-time responsibilities.
- Daily routines and rituals give a child a sense of stability and security, and may ease general anxiety.

## Professional help

Sometimes a child is so fearful that it interferes with their daily life and play. Professional help is advisable if you consider your child is particularly burdened with fears or phobias.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Child psychologist
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 55 1800

## Things to remember

- Sometimes children are afraid of situations or objects that adults don't consider threatening.
- Making fun of the child or forcing them to confront their fear will only make things worse.
- You can help your child by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

La Trobe University - School of Psychological Science

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