

Children's Fears

Facts about children's fears

- Like adults, when children feel a sense of control they have less fear.
- Fears are a normal part of childhood. Certain fears are typical at certain ages.
- Fear is real to your child, so take your child's fears seriously.
- Some fears develop with independence. For example, when a child begins to walk and understands he can leave mom, he realizes mom can leave him as well.
- A child's surroundings can increase fears, such as unfamiliar place.
- Sometimes a child's fear is based on a lack of knowledge. "The water goes down the drain, so I might disappear down the drain."
- Often, a child's fears are the same as his parent's.
- Fears can be increased by a parent's reaction or comments. For example, if a parent screams at the sight of a spider, the child will probably do the same.
- Children take what you say literally, such as, "The policeman will get you if you don't get in your car seat", or when a stranger says, "You're so cute I'm going to take you home with me." Be careful about referring to death as sleep – children may be afraid of going to sleep.

What to avoid when dealing with your child's fears

- Do not expect your child's fear to go away overnight.
- Do not shame your child's for his/her fears.
- Do not force your child to face his/her fears. This approach will make the situation worse. For example, if your child is afraid of dogs, forcing him/her to pet a dog will frighten the child even more.
- Try not to tell your child that they will be a "big boy" or "big girl" when he/she overcomes the fear. This puts too much pressure on the child.



How to help your child with fear

- Offer understanding of the fear. For example, “Loud noises, like thunder, can be scary.”
- Provide helpful information about the feared item or situation. For example, “Dogs bark because that is how they “talk” and sometimes they bark a lot when they are happy to see someone.”
- Read a special book, like “There’s a Nightmare in My Closet” by Mercer Mayer, and talk about the feared object or situation.
- Help your child approach fears at his/her own pace, which will probably be slow. For example, allowing a child to decide when to put his/her face under water when swimming gives him a sense of control and less fear.
- Closely monitor what your child watches on television. Many programs and movies are too intense for young children and may encourage their fears.

Most common early childhood fears

6 months	Stranger anxiety
8 months	Separation from parent; falling
1 year	Separation from parent, noises, animals, bath, doctor
2 years	Separation from parent, toilet training, bath, bedtime, doctor
3 years	Loss of parent, toilet training, bedtime, monsters and ghosts, anyone who looks different than family, e.g., disability, beard, different skin color, etc.
4 years	Noises, animals, bedtime, monsters and ghosts, people who look different than family, loss of parent, death, divorce
5 years	Noises, animals, monsters and ghosts, getting lost, going to day-care, loss of parent, death, injury, divorce

Chart adapted from When Your Child Is Afraid by Schachter & McCauley

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