



Children's fears and anxieties call for patience, understanding

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Things that go bump in the night, lightning and thunder, monsters in the closet and ghosts in the attic all sound pretty scary to a kid, right? When the sun rises, the monsters may disappear, but other fears may surface: going to school, bugs, water, a trip to the dentist, strangers, failure, loud noises and being separated from parents or caregivers.

As a child therapist and mother to small children, I know all too well the reality of such fears.

Childhood fears can be a normal part of development with useful purposes, including self-preservation. People are born with an innate, physiological response to perceived danger, often called the fight or flight response. When our brain sends our body a message that something is dangerous or scary, our body reacts, often by running away to avoid the danger or by fighting off the danger. We want our children to have a certain amount of fear, because we want them to stay safe and healthy. We teach them to never talk to strangers, to look both ways before crossing the street and not to pet stray dogs. These life lessons make sense to parents.

Sometimes, however, childhood fears can seem irrational — they don't make sense to us. Why, we might ask, would a child be so worried about being stung by a bee that they stay indoors rather than joining their friends playing outside? Why would a child kick and fight the doctor who is trying to make them feel better? Or why would a child refuse to sleep in his own bed after hours of reassurance?

Childhood fears can be very specific, for example, the fear of

spiders or storms. Other times, children may have anxiety that is more generalized, without specific triggers or events — the child who just seems "on edge." Fears often can be traced back to a traumatic event, but they also can seem to appear out of nowhere.

Childhood fears and anxiety can diminish as a child grows older, especially with a little intervention from caregivers. Here are some tips:

- Help your child put her fears into words or pictures.
- Validate your child's emotions: Fear and anxiety are real emotions, even if the thoughts behind them seem irrational.
- Help young children understand the difference between reality and imagination. You will not convince your child there is no monster in the closet, but you may convince him that a special toy has the power to ward off monsters.
- Keep a journal for older children, or have a written plan for situations that might trigger anxiety.
- Share information: Kids can become less scared of something if they know more facts. For example, doing some research on spiders and bugs can minimize fears of the unknown.
- Offer incentives and rewards for small progress: Even baby steps deserve praise and encouragement. Don't expect instant change. Encourage gradual exposure without forceful demands or punishments for setbacks.
- Expect some resistance: People generally try to avoid situations associated with anxiety and fear.

This resistance may feel like defiance. Reminding yourself that the emotions are real can help you as a caregiver be more patient.

- Limit exposure to scary things on TV: Children cannot always separate reality and make-believe.
- Provide a safe, predictable home environment to help children cope better in general.

Know when it is time to seek professional help.

When fears and anxiety begin to significantly get in the way of your child's day-to-day functioning, it may be a good idea to consult with a doctor or therapist.

Elizabeth Fallen is a licensed clinical social worker with Southwestern Behavioral Healthcare Inc. Contact the organization at (812) 436-4221 or comments@southwestern.org.