Anxiety and fear in children

Summary

- Sometimes children are afraid of situations or objects that adults don’t find 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.

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 find threatening.

The sources of fear may change as the child matures. For example, a fear of the dark or of 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 frightening situations.

Help your child to deal with fear by 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.

The fearful child

Some children are more fearful than others. Contributing factors may include:

- Genetic susceptibility – some children are generally more sensitive and emotional in their temperament
- At least one anxious parent – children learn how to behave from watching their parents
- Overprotective parenting – a dependent child is more likely to feel helpless and this can lead to generalised anxiety
- Stressful events – such as parental separation, an injury or hospital stay.

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 so much 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 include:

- Whenever possible at home, if your baby gets upset when you leave, take them 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 okay.
- If your baby is anxious, reassure them with a calm and confident expression.
- Leaving your baby to ‘cry it out’ will only make their anxiety worse.

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 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.

Fear of the dark

Many children are afraid of the dark. A toddler or preschooler tends to be afraid of unfamiliar things that they don’t understand or can’t control. Their active imaginations, and their inability to always distinguish between reality and fantasy, means they may believe that monsters are under the bed or in the wardrobe waiting to spring once the light goes out.

If not addressed, a child’s fear of the dark may linger and continue to disrupt their bedtime routine and sleeping habits. There are many ways that parents can help their child to overcome a fear of the dark.

Helping a child who is afraid of the dark

As with other fears, it is important to handle a child’s fear of the dark with sympathy and understanding. Do not ridicule or dismiss your child’s feelings, or become frustrated and angry. The first step in helping your child to overcome their irrational fear is to accept their feelings as real and respond to them sensitively.

Suggestions include:

- Ask them to tell you about their fears and what exactly makes them afraid.
- Show your child that you understand their fears, but that you don’t necessarily share them.
- Reassure them that they are safe; explain there are no such things as monsters.
- Don’t try to reassure your child by checking in the cupboard or under the bed as this may suggest to the child that you believe monsters could be there.
- If your child is afraid of the dark because of the possibility of intruders, it may help to show them the security measures around the house, such as locks. However, never lock a deadlock while people are inside the house, as it may block escape in a fire or other emergency.
- Ask your child for suggestions on what would make them feel more secure. Offer suggestions yourself. Perhaps they would feel better if they took a special toy or comforter to bed.
• Find out if their fear of the dark comes from other worries. For example, some children may be afraid of their parents separating or dying, and this anxiety gets worse when they are alone in the dark. Talk to your child honestly about such issues.

General suggestions for fear of the dark

Practical ways to deal with your child’s fear of the dark include:

• Establish a bedtime routine that your child finds relaxing and enjoyable. Predictable bedtime routines help to reduce anxiety.
• Put a nightlight in your child’s room, or let some light from the hallway or other nearby source filter into their room.
• A child’s fear tends to lessen if they feel they have some control over a situation. For example put a lamp by their bedside so they can switch on the light themselves. Use a low-wattage bulb. 
• Make sure their television viewing habits and reading materials are appropriate to their age. News footage, movies or scary books can easily frighten a child.
• Look around their room at night and try to see things from their perspective. Is there a picture or toy that may cast a shadow or look creepy in the half-light?
• Regular exercise helps to reduce stress levels. Make sure your child has plenty of physical activity during the day.
• Don’t make a big deal or fuss about your child’s fear in front of them or other people, in case they feel more anxious about it.
• Don’t make fun of or belittle their fear.
• There are many books on managing childhood fears, both for the parents and the child.
• Reinforce positive behaviour. Allow your child to make small steps towards overcoming their fear and compliment them on each achievement. Whenever they accomplish a step, such as not jumping out of bed the minute you tuck them in, reward them. Toddlers respond well to simple reward systems, such as stickers or stamps on a wall chart.

Professional help for fear and anxiety in children

Sometimes a child is so fearful that it interferes with their daily life and play. Seek professional help if you consider your child is particularly burdened with fears or phobias. Children can be taught how to manage their own anxiety, and parents can learn helping strategies.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• Maternal and child health nurse
• Child psychologist
• Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
• Parentline Tel. 132 289
• Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577

Things to remember

• Sometimes children are afraid of situations or objects that adults don’t find 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.