Anxiety and fear in children
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
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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.

References


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Anxiety explained

- Anxiety and fear in children
  You can help your child overcome anxiety by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings.
- Anxiety disorders
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people.
- Anxiety Disorders - Diagnosis (video)
  Anxiety disorders are common, affecting about one in ten with persistent, excessive worrying that can hinder their ability to function. They may worry constantly about things that do not warrant it or...
- Anxiety Disorders - treatment and support (video)
  In this video clip, participants discuss the various forms of treatment and support they have received from medical professionals as well as from other sources. Some of the strategies for managing...
- Depression explained
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support.
- Fighting your fears
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.
- Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
  Worrying can be constructive if it helps you to work out possible solutions to a problem, but some people are troubled by excessive anxiety.
- Let's talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his.
- Managing and treating anxiety
  Learning all about anxiety is central to recovery.
- Self-harm and self-injury
  Self-harm and self-injury is when people hurt themselves on purpose, usually in response to intense emotional pain or negative feelings, thoughts or memories.

Phobias

- Agoraphobia
  A person with agoraphobia is afraid to leave familiar environments, because they are afraid of having a panic attack.
- Anxiety Disorders - Diagnosis (video)
  Anxiety disorders are common, affecting about one in ten with persistent, excessive worrying that can hinder their ability to function. They may worry constantly about things that do not warrant it or...
- Anxiety Disorders - treatment and support (video)
  In this video clip, participants discuss the various forms of treatment and support they have received from medical professionals as well as from other sources. Some of the strategies for managing...
- Claustrophobia
  With appropriate treatment, it is possible to overcome claustrophobia or any other phobia.

- Fear of flying
  About one in six people have a significant fear that prevents them from flying, so fear of flying is common.

- Fighting your fears
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

- Social phobia
  A person with social phobia experiences anxiety in situations where they are likely to be scrutinised and observed by others.

### Obsessive compulsive disorder

- Anxiety Disorders - Diagnosis (video)
  Anxiety disorders are common, affecting about one in ten with persistent, excessive worrying that can hinder their ability to function. They may worry constantly about things that do not warrant it or...

- Anxiety Disorders - treatment and support (video)
  In this video clip, participants discuss the various forms of treatment and support they have received from medical professionals as well as from other sources. Some of the strategies for managing...

- Fighting your fears
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

- Let's talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

### Panic disorder

- Anxiety Disorders - Diagnosis (video)
  Anxiety disorders are common, affecting about one in ten with persistent, excessive worrying that can hinder their ability to function. They may worry constantly about things that do not warrant it or...

- Anxiety Disorders - treatment and support (video)
  In this video clip, participants discuss the various forms of treatment and support they have received from medical professionals as well as from other sources. Some of the strategies for managing...

- Dizziness and vertigo
  Dizziness is generally treatable and rarely indicates serious brain disease.

- Fighting your fears
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

- Let's talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

- Panic attack
  Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling.

- Panic disorder and agoraphobia
  Panic disorder is not the same as anxiety or a single panic attack. Most people experience anxiety and up to 40 per cent of us have a panic attack at some stage during our lives. People who have...

### Trauma

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Anxiety Disorders - treatment and support (video)

In this video clip, participants discuss the various forms of treatment and support they have received from medical professionals as well as from other sources. Some of the strategies for managing...

Fighting your fears

Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life...

Near-miss experiences and traumatic events

Traumatic events usually happen quickly and chaotically. A near-miss experience occurs when you are involved in a traumatic event where you think you will die or be badly hurt, but are not. This can...

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event...

Survivor reactions to traumatic events

If you have survived a traumatic event, whether you were injured or not, it's important to recognise that trauma also causes emotional harm. Survival is often associated with complex emotional...

Torture and trauma

Some survivors of torture and trauma live with their memories for years, or even for the rest of their lives...

Trauma and children - newborns to two years

Babies and toddlers can be as affected by trauma as any other family member...

Trauma and children – tips for parents

Tell your child the facts about a distressing or frightening experience using language they can understand...

Trauma and children - two to five years

Preschoolers may not have the words but will show their distress at traumatic events through changes in behaviour and functioning...

Trauma and families

When a family is affected by trauma, everyone will react in a different way...

Trauma and primary school age children

Children look to their parents or carers to judge how to deal with a crisis...

Trauma and teenagers - common reactions

A teenager may be deeply upset by a traumatic event, but not share their feelings with their parents...

Trauma - Anne Leadbeater OAM & Dr Rob Gordon

Trauma experts Dr Rob Gordon and Anne Leadbeater share valuable insights on coping with trauma, helping others who have experienced trauma, and seeking different ways to move forward...

Trauma - helping family or friends

There are things you can do to try to help someone who has been through a distressing or frightening event...

Related Information

- A Healthy Start to School
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school...

- A Healthy Start to School
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school...

- No Jab No Play
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age...

- Asthma explained

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives...

- **Discipline and children**
  
  Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control...

**Related information on other websites**

- Women’s and Children’s Health Network – Anxiety: when you are worrying about things (for children)
- Women’s and Children’s Health Network – Fears: young children

**Support Groups**

- Parent-Infant Research Institute, Infant Clinic

**Content Partner**

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