

Fearful Feelings

Professor Matt Sanders

REMEMBER HOW SCARY A LOT OF THINGS LOOKED WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD? LOSING SIGHT OF YOUR PARENTS IN A CROWDED SHOPPING CENTRE, THE BLACKNESS OF NIGHT, DOGS THAT WERE BIG ENOUGH TO LOOK YOU IN THE EYE, OR THOSE MONSTERS THAT LIVED UNDER THE BED.

Even a happy, safe and secure childhood includes a very normal amount of fear. When psychologists talk about fear we often use the term anxiety to describe those physical feelings of increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating and shaking that make up a subjective sense of fear.

Fear is a natural and essential part of our human make up. It helps keep us safe. Our fears lead us to naturally avoid many things that have the ability to cause us physical harm such as fire, electricity, turbulent water or savage dogs.

Most children's fears are mild and come and go at different times. However, with some children their fear becomes so strong they may develop phobias or suffer from what is called generalised anxiety. In fact research shows more than one-third of children aged between 2 and 14 years of age experience some form of anxiety intense enough to interfere with their daily lives.

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The list of things that children can be afraid of varies depending on age and the individual personality of the child. Common fears include war, being hit by a car, not being able to breathe, fire, falling from high places, a burglar breaking into the house, and snakes and spiders. As children get older, social fears, such as fear of criticism, embarrassment or rejection become more common.

Anxiety and phobias can develop either through learning, watching others or through being rewarded for showing fear.

Learning a fear occurs when, for example, a child walking home from school sees a dog that comes close and starts barking loudly. The sudden loud noise distresses the child and can lead to them being afraid of other large dogs, or in fact of any dog, no matter how small or non-threatening.

Children may also develop a fear by watching another child or adult displaying their own fear. Many children grow up fearing the same things their parents do.

The accidental reinforcement of a fear can occur through a parent's natural desire to calm their child. Take the case of a child showing fear of the dark when their bedroom light is turned out. If you give them lots of attention and reassurance, or spend time soothing, stroking or calming them while leaving the light on, they are in fact being directly rewarded for their fear. All that positive attention is likely to result in your child continuing to be afraid of the dark.



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Of course, the answer isn't to just cast them out at the mercy of a great big scary world.

Try to be understanding and encourage your child to talk about their fears, no matter how silly they may sound to you. Stay calm, and talk to them about situations where you yourself felt anxious about something.

Remember to keep your own fears under control, and teach your child some basic coping strategies for handling a fearful situation:

Breathing. Take some slow, deep breaths, as if you are blowing up a balloon.

Relaxation. Let your body go floppy like a rag doll so that all your muscles are relaxed and loose.

Imagination. Distract yourself from the scary thoughts by thinking of a happy memory or an exciting upcoming event, or perhaps a quite peaceful scene where you felt relaxed, such as during a holiday.

Self-talk. Think of positive things to say to yourself, such as: "It's just a grasshopper, it can't hurt me", or "I am boss of my body, so chill out and be cool!"

Part of learning to cope with fears also involves facing them slowly and getting closer and closer to the feared thing. It can take time for children to overcome their fears, but with time, practice, and lots of praise, children will learn the confidence necessary to face adulthood.

Parenting Tip: Over protectiveness on the part of parents can inadvertently encourage development of anxiety in children. Try to encourage your child to experience social situations which may challenge their emerging skills at everyday communication and interactions by joining clubs, inviting other children over for a visit, or holding parties. If your child has many fears that interfere with daily activities, seek professional help.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.