Is It “Normal” for Children to Be Afraid?

Fear is a normal emotion. It’s nature’s way of alerting us to react to danger, and helps protect us from threatening situations. The world of childhood is full of fears because a child’s world is constantly expanding, and children spend a good deal of time learning to cope with the unfamiliar. Since young children’s understanding of cause and effect is limited, and the lines of fantasy and reality are not easily distinguished, the world can be a confusing and frightening place.

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We can’t eliminate all fears, and some fear may serve a useful purpose, such as fear of cars on a busy street. However, we do need to help children understand their feelings of fear. Studies show that fears appear and disappear in an ordered, patterned fashion that is similar from child to child. Each new developmental stage brings its own characteristic fears. As children age, the situations they fear change as well. Younger children typically fear loud noises, strangers, and unfamiliar objects. These fears give way to others, as children begin to develop the ability to understand their environment and become more confident in their ability to deal with it. Fear of death, the dark, ridicule, robbers, and “monsters” are typical for children from 3-6 years of age.

How Can I Help My Child Cope with His Fears?

- Don’t laugh at children’s fears. Ridicule is a common response to fear. But laughing at fears does not decrease the fear, and only diminishes the child’s confidence. Statements such as “Don’t be a sissy--big kids aren’t afraid of the dark” only shame children and make them doubt their own feelings. Children (and adults) whose feelings are ridiculed soon stop sharing their feelings and experiences.

  - Don’t ignore children’s fears. Telling your child that shots won’t hurt makes her feel as though she must deal with her fear all by herself. Children may repress and never work out their fears unless they talk about them. Give your child the reassurance she needs. She may want you to listen to her account of the fearful happening more than once, and she may ask you to explain it over and over again. All of this helps to make the event less frightening and leads to mastery of the fear.

  Encouraging your child to talk about the feared situation helps to make the event less frightening and leads to mastery of the fear.

  - Don’t force children in situations they fear. Trying to overcome a large fear all at once by using shock methods rarely works. Rather, it serves to intensify the fear. Give your child the chance to become used to the fearful situation a little at a time. If he is afraid of large dogs, let him first get acquainted with a small puppy or a gentle older dog.

  - Don’t lie to children about their fears. Lying to your child about a frightening situation usually produces more fear. Truthfulness and preparing for the feared situation can help your child manage it. For example, before your child goes to the hospital for an operation, take him to the hospital for a tour, read books about hospitals, talk to others who have
It is important to help children learn to cope with their fears in ways that preserve their dignity and self-worth. As you help your child gradually become familiar with the unknown, her experiences in mastering the unfamiliar will give her confidence she needs to master new things rather than shrinking away from new situations.


Questions About Kids is on the Web at:
http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed

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