

Easing your child's fears



By Dr. Danielle Grenier

Q: My three-year-old is easily frightened by ordinary situations. Is this normal? What can I do to calm his fears?

A: Things that seem harmless to adults may be scary for children. With insight, understanding, and patience, adults can help children deal with their fears.

What children fear depends in large part on their age. Of course not all children are the same, but here are some basic issues to keep in mind about toddlers and preschoolers (ages two to four years):

First of all, it's normal for toddlers and preschoolers to have fears. At this age, children have vivid imaginations, and have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy. They may also find new things to be "scary". Everyday situations may frighten toddlers, such as bedtime, bath time, or going to the doctor.

To an adult, toddlers' fears may be rational (for example, a fear of dogs), or irrational (such as being afraid of what's under the bed). Either way, it's important for parents to take their child's fears seriously because they are real to him.

By age three, most children can separate from their parents with little or no crying.

Young children may also have scary nightmares that wake them up. If this happens, they'll need your reassurance that the things they saw in the dream are not real. Talk to them and stay close until they fall back to sleep.

Night terrors are not the same as nightmares. Children who experience a night terror may wake up screaming and thrashing, but they are only partially awake and won't necessarily be aware of your presence. They will not respond to you, and will usually fall back asleep without completely waking up. They won't remember it the next day.

Here's what parents can do to help calm their children's fears:

Never force your child to confront the fear before he's ready. Allow him to work through it at his own pace. When he does, be sure to give lots of praise.

Respect that the fear is real for your child. Don't belittle your toddler or make fun of him.

Help your child work through the fear. Read books, make up stories or act out situations that deal with your child's particular fear.

Try to desensitize your child to the fearful object or situation. Using a toy fire engine may help to reduce the fear of the real one.

Help your child feel physically secure by hugging him, holding his hand, and being close. You can also teach him to take long, deep breaths to reduce his anxiety.

Encourage your child to share his fears with a "worry doll"— either use one of his existing stuffed animals or create one together.

Try not to reinforce the fear by being scared yourself. Overprotection can also cause children to be unnecessarily fearful.

Limit your child's exposure to media that may create fears or make them even worse. This includes TV, movies, video games, Internet, and even printed material. You can also help teach children good media habits, which will help them distinguish between what's real and what's not real.

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