

About fears and worries

Everyone experiences fear

It is one of the most basic human emotions, helping to keep us safe by alerting us to danger. The fear response prepares us to flee or withdraw from threatening situations.

An important part of children's growth involves learning how to cope with the common fears of childhood. As children learn to manage their emotions and overcome everyday fears, their confidence grows for taking on new challenges. Parents and carers and school staff can play a critical role in helping children develop skills for managing feelings and coping with fear.

How children experience fear

Fear reactions are made up of physical changes, feelings and behaviours. The body responds to fear by speeding up the heart rate and breathing so that we can act quickly to respond to danger. Along with this we may experience physical symptoms such as feeling tightness in the chest, getting shaky or sweaty, or having 'butterflies in the stomach'. Sometimes people turn pale with fear – usually when the fear is very strong. Children often simply describe the unpleasant feelings in the stomach as 'feeling sick'. These sorts of physical responses to fear are associated with psychological responses such as feeling scared, tense, nervous or worried.

Children who experience fear are more likely to show us than tell us that they are afraid. They may do this by seeking reassurance, by trying to avoid the situation that makes them fearful, by becoming agitated or by becoming upset. If the situation that makes them fearful is one they cannot avoid they may try to get a parent, carer or other trusted adult to deal with it for them. Some behaviours that adults frequently find annoying, like nagging and whingeing, result from children's attempts to avoid situations they are afraid of.

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Helping children to cope with fears

Children need adult support in order to learn to cope with fears. They need reassurance to reduce their anxious feelings, and skills for coping so that they can gradually learn to manage fears themselves.

Learning to cope with fears and worries helps children develop confidence

How parents and carers can help

- Acknowledge how your child is feeling. Naming it (eg 'feeling scared') helps the child begin to see fear as a normal emotion that can be overcome.
- Stay cool yourself so you can model positive coping.
- Tell them how you learned to get over fears when you were their age.
- Positive self-talk can help children put fears into perspective (eg "The storms on TV are far away from here. My house will be okay").
- Asking what a favourite hero might do in this situation can sometimes be helpful for encouraging children to be brave.
- Learning relaxation skills is often very helpful for dealing with fears.
- Help the child put realistic limits around the scary situation. For example, Jessica's parents could explain that the TV pictures she saw were about something that happens rarely and only when the weather is extreme.
- Since television is a frequent trigger for children's fears it is important to monitor television viewing to minimise exposure to things that may be frightening. It can also help to discuss scary things at the time they are seen on TV.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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Coping with fears and worries

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for early primary aged children, but can be modified for use with older ages. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

Parents and carers are usually the first people children look to for support and reassurance when they are scared or worried. Providing reassurance such as hugs and encouragement helps to restore children's sense of safety and confidence. Giving children a sense of safety includes limiting their exposure to frightening situations, such as violence – whether real or on TV. Parents and carers can also play a leading role in helping children learn skills for managing their fears.

Things to take into account

- It takes time and effort for children to learn new coping skills.
- Younger children usually learn best when you do it with them.
- Though older children may be able to use coping skills independently, they still need your support when scared.
- All children feel more secure and confident when they have regular quality time with parents and carers.
- Bedtime is often when children's fears surface. Try to ensure that children have calming time before bed to unwind. A regular bedtime routine or ritual helps children feel a sense of safety and security.

Key points for supporting children's coping skills

For children to learn to manage fear effectively they need adult support and guidance. Acknowledging children's fears is an important first step. Helping children to understand how fear affects their bodies and thinking is the next step in teaching them how to manage it. Parents and carers also have an important role in showing children how to apply helpful coping skills to reduce fearful feelings.

Provide times to talk

Your support and encouragement will help your child to attempt what at first seems scary. Show you understand by acknowledging how your child feels. You can help children recognise when they are feeling scared by naming the feelings, for example: "It sounds like you're a bit worried about..." or "You're feeling a bit scared, are you?" Labelling fears in this way helps children to see that feeling scared is a normal feeling that can be managed.

Model appropriate behaviour

Children learn a lot about how to get through difficult situations in life from the examples set by parents and carers. If a child comes to share a worry with you and they see you are also worried, they can lose confidence and become more fearful. If instead you can stay calm and deal with stressful situations, you are actually helping them to learn coping skills. Better still, you can talk out loud with them about how you deal with fear and worry. This helps children see that even grownups get scared or worried at times, and that feeling scared is something you understand and can help them with.

Build confidence and independence in small steps

Having successes helps build confidence. When children are set small challenges that they can succeed at, it can support their confidence for doing more things independently. For example, you may get your child to buy an everyday item from a shop on his own. If that is too difficult then you can make the task more manageable by breaking it into smaller steps. You might stand near at first while he talks to the sales assistant. When he can do this, you may prompt him to go into the shop alone.

Spend time preparing for a scary situation before it happens

Prepare children for situations they may find scary by planning ahead and practising ideas about what to do. Children don't learn when they are already fearful, because fear makes it hard for them to remember what you are saying. Preparation and practice help them use their coping skills and see that they can manage.

If ongoing fear and worry make it hard for children to enjoy life or interfere with their ability to manage everyday activities at home, at school or socially, they may need help for an anxiety difficulty.

For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on children with anxiety.

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