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Children and Their Fears



Almost all children can be frightened by the sound of thunder or scared in a dark room. With a little patience and understanding, you can usually help your children overcome these and other common childhood fears. However, as a parent, you are keenly aware that there are real dangers that threaten your children. While you are working to help your children get rid of some kinds of fear, you are also teaching certain other kinds of fear for their own protection.

What frightens your children?

Often children's fears grow out of experiences which they cannot understand and which seems to threaten them. Of course, one child might not be frightened by something that frightens a brother or sister, but some of the things likely to cause fear are:

- **other people's reactions to things or events** - Another child's intense fear of snakes or an adult's horror at seeing a large spider can cause your child to fear the same things.
- **seeing a traumatic, frightening event** - Your child may witness a bad traffic accident or see a cat run over by a car. Scenes like these can leave lasting, fearful memories.
- **low self-esteem and lack of confidence** - Fears can develop from low self-esteem and lack of confidence. It is important to encourage and praise your child's efforts and to develop his/her self-confidence.
- **ongoing family tensions and hostility** - All families have fights once in a while, but if the fighting goes on all the time, children will absorb the tension, and fear and uncertainty will become part of their lives.

Overcoming your children's fears

No matter what your child fears, he/she needs the comfort of loving reassurance more than anything. You should never make fun of your child's fears, and you should let him/ her know that grown-ups, too, are sometimes afraid. Other things you can do are:

- **Give loving support and reliable limits.** Your child needs to know he / she is loved and also that you set definite limits on what he/she is allowed to do. Your love and those limits provide the sense of security your child needs to try new experiences without fear.
- **Try to find practical solutions.** If your child is afraid of the dark, plug in a night-light in the bedroom and hall. Keep the furniture arranged in a way your child is used to, and make sure he/she goes to sleep with a cuddly toy to hug.
- **Spend time practising skills with your child.** If your child is afraid of catching a ball or playing a game such as soccer, spend time playing games at home in a safe environment.
- **Help build a sense of being in control.** Some children become afraid of flushing the toilet or emptying the bathtub. Encourage your child to pull the plug or turn the toilet handle with you, and reassure him/ her that "there is no way you can go down the drain."
- **Reassure, reassure, and then reassure again.** This is especially important if your child begins to worry about dying. He/she needs to hear many times that it is very unusual for children to die. Try a hug and a reminder, "Don't worry; we'll be together for a long, long time."

- **Praise accomplishments, avoid criticizing.** Praising even small successes will encourage your child to try again. Too much criticizing is likely to make your child insecure and afraid to try new things.

Real dangers your children face

Your children must be taught about the very real dangers that do exist. These dangers can be divided into two kinds:

- **Basic safety problems** - You must teach your children safety rules about hazards in the home, such as hot stove tops, electrical outlets and various household poisons. Outside the home, children must learn how to ride a bicycle and cross the street safely, and many other safety habits.
- **Dangerous people** - Unfortunately, your children face the danger of abduction and sexual abuse by dangerous people. Some may be strangers, but more commonly, they can be relatives or acquaintances.

The challenge for you as the parent is to teach your children to be self-confident and ready to cope with new situations, but also to be cautious of potentially dangerous situations. Most children are able to understand and learn caution at about the age of three.

How can you protect them from the real dangers?

There are a number of things you can do to help your children protect themselves and still enjoy their childhood. The best defence against abduction and abuse is information. Be truthful and honest with them. The more information children have, the better they will be able to handle any situation. As a parent, you should:

- Always know where your children are and who is supervising them. Make sure that the person(s) looking after your children always know how to reach you.
- Never leave young children alone at home, in a car or in a public place.
- Always go with them to any unfamiliar place when they are young. As they get older, set up a telephone check-in system to confirm their departures and arrivals, and have them carry enough money to call home.
- Have a family code word and teach your children how to use it: don't go with anyone unless they know and say the family code word. It is important that your children never tell the code word to anyone, but if they do, change it immediately.
- Set up family emergency procedures. Know the names, addresses and telephone numbers of your children's friends. Teach them what to do if you get separated while shopping.
- Teach your children how to get help in an emergency - dial 911 or "0" on the phone; find a policeman, bus driver, school, church, mall security or information desk, store cashier, or a house with a Block Parent sign.
- Teach your children their full name, home address (including city) and phone number (including the area code).
- Let your children know it's OK to say "No" if they think something they are being asked to do isn't right, even by someone they know. If someone tells them to keep a secret from you, they should tell you about it right away.
- Help your children to be comfortable talking about the private parts of their bodies so that, if necessary, they can tell you about "bad touches" (ones that make them feel weird or uncomfortable).
- Play "what if" games with your children. Ask them what they would do in a potentially dangerous situation and listen to their answers. Ask them why and why not, what is right and wrong. Practise how they should answer the telephone. Teach them just who a stranger is. It is better to imagine the worse than to experience it!

Your children should know and follow these streetproofing rules:

- Don't go anywhere alone; travel in groups. Don't take short-cuts or hitch-hike, and avoid potentially dangerous places including public washrooms.
- Don't accept gifts from strangers or get into a stranger's car. Don't offer to help a stranger;

- adults don't have to ask children for help.
- If alone, never admit it to anyone on the telephone and don't answer the door or let anyone in.
 - Don't be a target. Don't put their name on clothes or equipment; if bags or lunch-boxes must be labelled, do it on the inside. Above all else, your children should learn to trust their instincts. If they feel suspicious, scared or threatened, they should do something about it. They should get away as soon and as fast as possible, and tell someone as soon as they can. They shouldn't be afraid to yell out, "You're a stranger. Stop it. Leave me alone," - yelling can attract attention and may bring the help they need. In an emergency, they don't have to be polite!

Do you need more information?

For more information on child safety and protection, contact your local police department or streetproofing organization. If you need help dealing with your child's fears, see your family doctor or school guidance counsellor, or contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.