

# Consumer and Family Sciences

Department of  
Child Development  
and Family Studies

**PURDUE**  
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## Helping Children Overcome Fears



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Purdue Extension

**Knowledge to Go**

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*“There used to be a nightmare in my closet.  
Before going to sleep I always closed the closet door.  
I was even afraid to turn around and look. ...  
One night I decided to get rid of my nightmare once and for all.  
As soon as the room was dark, I heard him creeping toward me.  
Quickly I turned on the light and caught him  
sitting at the foot of my bed. “Go away Nightmare, or  
I’ll shoot you,” I said.*

(Mercer Mayer [1968]. *There’s a Nightmare in My Closet*)

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Everyone experiences fear at some points in their lives. Children, though, are particularly likely to have fears. Adults might see children’s fears as silly, but they are very real to the children. The goal of this publication is to help you understand the fears of children. It may also provide ideas you can use to help your children deal with their fears. Children will outgrow many of their fears, but you can help make the process quicker and more pleasant.

## All children have fears

Fear is common among children and can be seen as a good thing. Children need to learn that there are things to be afraid of, such as traffic on busy streets or hot stoves. Too much fear and too little fear are both problems for children. A child with too much fear may be afraid to participate in normal activities. A child with too little fear may take too many chances and get hurt. You may notice that some of your children have more fears than others. Children are born with different temperaments and personalities. This means that some children are timid, shy and fearful. Other children are carefree and brave.

Many types of fears are normal. Children move through different types of fears as they grow. For example, many young children will show fear of strangers and fear of the dark. Most children grow out of these fears. These fears exist because children know a little bit about something but not enough about it to deal with it realistically. Children may be frightened of TV shows. But eventually they will learn what is real and what is not real. Each age group faces its own set of age-related fears. Usually, there is no need to worry about them. Although outgrowing age-related fears takes time, there are things you can do to help children.

## Some children have unique fears

Some fears are unique to your child. They may come from the child’s experiences. Fears could

develop because your child knows someone who is afraid. For example, if an older sibling panics whenever there is a spider in the house, other children may learn to fear spiders. Other fears could develop because of experiences such as a hospitalization or illness. Stressful experiences such as divorce or natural disasters often result in fears. Your child may need extra help to work through fears that result from specific experiences.

## Ways to help children cope with their fears

- 1) **Accept and respect children’s fears.** Fears are real to children, so don’t laugh or say their fears are not real. Children will grow out of most fears. First, they need to learn skills to deal with fears. These skills will help them for the rest of their life. Take time to teach coping skills.
- 2) **Spend extra time with your children when they seem to be afraid.** During storms or at bedtime might be times when children need special attention. Combined with fears of the dark, other fears look larger. Bedtime routines like a song or a story can be comforting.
- 3) **Establish a predictable routine.** This makes your children feel secure in their world. It helps them to know what to expect.
- 4) **Talk about feeling scared.** It is important for children to learn to talk about all of their feelings, including fear. When a child looks as if he is scared, you can say to him, “You are biting your fingernails. Does that mean you feel scared?” This helps children to name what they feel. It also helps you learn how each of your children shows their fears. Some children will suck their thumb. Some will fidget. Some will whine and complain more. When you talk with them about being scared, you are helping them to learn to talk about all of their feelings. If you see your children looking scared,

talking about their feelings gives them a chance to tell you why they are scared.

- 5) **Use play to talk about fears.** It might help to use dolls, puppets, stories, and art to talk about being afraid. The children could act out their fears; this gives them a sense of control. Ask them to talk about their drawings or other creations.
- 6) **Help children learn about the things that scare them.** Knowing how things work and what to expect can make things less scary. Read books about why fire trucks have sirens, or learn about thunder and lightning. Let your child know that it is okay to be a little afraid of some things — like dogs you don't know or strangers who ask you to get in their car.
- 7) **Talk about your fears, too.** Children need to know that adults have different kinds of feelings. They need to see how adults deal with feelings like fear. Name your feelings, so children learn to express their feelings with words. Talk about how fear makes you feel in your body to help your child connect physical feelings with their emotions. Tell them what you do to feel better.
- 8) **Recognize courage.** Tell your children when you notice them being brave and trying something that scares them. For example you could say, "When we walked by the dog, you didn't ask to be picked up, but just held my hand tightly. Good for you, you are getting brave!"
- 9) **Make suggestions for coping with fear.** Ask your children what would help them feel less afraid. Talk about how you coped with fears when you were a child. Teaching your child about relaxation breathing can also help. If pictures of bombs and shooting scare your child, limit time watching TV and the news. If your child is scared of the dark, suggest sleeping with the door open. Asking them what will help them teaches them problem-solving skills.

## Helping cope with age-related fears

Parents can help their children to overcome their fears. There are four general things parents can do to comfort their children.

- 1) **Touch is important.** Young children find touch comforting. Pick up a crying baby. When a child is scared of a dog, picking her up brings comfort quickly. For older children, hug them or pat them on the back when they are scared.

- 2) **Listen to your children.** For babies, crying or whining tells you they are scared. When children use words, listen to what they say about their fears. Take time to let your children talk about their fears. Remember that their fears are real to them.
- 3) **Talk to your children about fears.** Don't make fun of their fears. Tell them what is true. Tell them that the vacuum cleaner will not suck them up. Tell them you checked under the bed; there are no monsters there. Assure them you will take care of them.
- 4) **Play with your children.** Play with dolls or puppets with your child. When they play, children express their feelings. Playing firefighter or police officer gives children a feeling of control over bad things. Playing baseball or splashing in the pool with your children is a fun way to get rid of stress in their bodies. Reading books is another great way to talk about fears and to learn about things that scare them. (See the Resources section at the back of this publication.)

## Scary dreams and nightmares

Scary dreams or nightmares usually occur in the early morning. These dreams usually have something to do with the child's life. Children who have had very bad experiences often have scary dreams. When the child wakes up, he usually remembers the nightmare. He may be very scared because of it. It is hard for a child to fall asleep after a scary dream. Listen to your child's dream. Hold him or rub his back. Talk about the dream. Talk about what he is scared of in real life. You might want to stay in or near the child's bedroom until he falls back asleep.

## Night terrors

Night terrors usually happen about one hour after children fall asleep. They wake up in a panic. They may be sweating or have a fast heart rate. They won't remember night terrors in the morning. When they wake up, they may be confused. Most children who have night terrors can fall asleep again quickly. (The adult, on the other hand, may not fall asleep again very quickly after this happens!) It helps to stay with children, because they might continue to have night terrors until they fall asleep. Hold them. Tell them it was just a dream. These night terrors can last for a few years.

## Age-related fears

Key: I = infant, T = toddler, P = preschooler, S = school-age, A = adolescent

	Fear	Why is my child afraid	How to cope with this fear
I T	Loud noises	Young children are getting used to the world. Loud noises startle them.	Hold them close and comfort them. Talk softly and tell them they are safe. Tell them about what is making the noise. Let toddlers touch a vacuum cleaner or other noise-maker when it is off.
I T	Strangers	Babies have learned what their moms and dads look like. Strangers are unfamiliar to them. Children don't know if they can trust strangers.	Pick up your children, or hold their hands when they are hesitant to meet new people. This tells them you will take care of them. Talk to them about the new person. Talk about safe people in the community.
T P	Baths	Small children know that water and soap suds disappear down the drain. They might wonder if they could get sucked down the drain too. They do not understand that they are too big. Some children just don't like water.	Make sure your children are safe in the bathtub. Talk to them and play with them. Make a bath fun by providing water toys. Take the child out of the tub before draining the water.
T P	Separation	Children know that their moms and dads take care of them. Infants believe that when they can't see something, it doesn't exist anymore. They are not likely to have separation fears. However, for toddlers and preschoolers, it scares them when you go away; they don't know that you'll come back.	Talk to children about new places. Bring them to visit (preschool, babysitter), and spend time there with them. Before you leave, get them involved in an activity. Say goodbye when you go. A special goodbye like a handshake and a hug can help some children. Find out how long it takes the children to settle down after you leave. It is probably just a few minutes.
P	Animals (especially dogs)	Animals are very unpredictable in their movement. Dogs are often loud, and the noise can frighten children.	Pick up your children, or hold their hands when dogs are around. Talk about dogs. Watch dogs with your children. Comment about how the dog plays with the owner. Let the children pet a small, calm dog held by an adult.
P S	Dark	This fear takes a long time to go away. In the dark, the child's mind can create many scary images. Young children often imagine monsters. Older children more often imagine burglars.	Hug your children before bed. Tuck them in. Leave the light on in the hallway or get a nightlight for their room. Stay nearby until your child falls asleep. Let children decide when they don't need their nightlight any more.
P S	Ghosts/ Monsters	Children's minds are very active. They are still learning the difference between what is real and what is not.	It can be helpful to get your children a nightlight. Talk with them about where the shadows come from. Use your imagination to create friendly ghosts or funny monsters, such as a daddy monster who watches over the child and scares other monsters away.

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S	Snakes, spiders, and bugs	Spiders and snakes are often scary in movies. Many people are afraid of them. Your children may learn the fear from others.	Teach your children about insects and snakes by using books or magazines. Read stories in which spiders have a good role (like <i>Charlotte's Web</i> ). They could play with toy insects. Try to keep your own fear under control.
S A	Fear of failure/ Fear of rejection	Older children think a lot about how other people see them. They don't want to look stupid in front of their friends. They are figuring out who they are, and they want to look good. They also don't want to let you down.	Help your children learn that everyone makes mistakes. Admit when you make a mistake, and talk about what you did. Encourage your children to take appropriate risks. Set reasonable expectations for your children. Do not criticize your children in front of others.
S	News/TV shows	School-age children are old enough to know that most TV is not real. They also know that bad things do happen. Watching TV and the news can frighten children, because they know things like murder and kidnapping do happen.	Listen to their fears. Talk about being street smart. Talk about what is real on TV and what is not. Set limits on watching the news, "reality programs," and scary TV shows.
S	Blood/ Injury/ Illness/ Doctors	Children know that injuries and sickness do happen. They know they can get hurt. Blood is scary because it is related to pain and because children at some ages are sensitive to body fluids.	Listen to your children's fears. Talk to them about safety. Play doctor. Read books about going to the doctor or hospital. Have your children watch you get a blood test done or go to the dentist.
S	Being home alone	Some children are afraid of being home alone. It may leave children feeling like there is no one to protect them.	Listen to your children's fears. Teach them the skills they need to care for themselves and stay safe. Teach your children what to do in an emergency. It might help if they don't watch scary movies or TV shows when they are home alone.
S	Death	School-age children have seen images of death, but most don't understand it. Younger children are not afraid of death, because they think it is not permanent. They become more afraid when they find out that dead people do not just wake up.	Talk with your children about death. Listen to their fears and their ideas. Explain what happens to the body after death. Talk about your beliefs about an afterlife. Attend the funeral of a distant relative, or have a funeral for a pet that has died. Read books about death.
S	War/ Terrorism	War and terrorism are feared by many people have. As children learn about the world and politics, they may become afraid of political violence.	Listen to children's feelings and ideas. Correct their misunderstandings. Teach them about conflict and creative ways of dealing with it. Assure them that you will do everything you can to keep them safe. For more resources on this topic, see the list at the end of this publication.

## Concerns

### 1) **Don't scare your children to get them to behave.**

Some parents try to make children afraid to get them to follow rules. It is not a very effective way to control children's behavior. Fear uses the lower levels of the brain, so children do not learn to think when parents use fear. Using fear in discipline can make children more afraid of other things. When they are often scared, their brains learn to be scared more quickly. Learn different ways to discipline your children. See the list of resources on discipline at the back of this publication.

### 2) **My 12-year-old is still afraid of monsters!** Some children do not outgrow fears as soon as other children. Sometimes being scared makes children sick. Some children are so scared that they don't do things that most other children do. These are all signs that your child needs some extra help coping with and overcoming his fears.

### 3) **My child needs more help.** Where do I get help? There are some things that you can do as a parent to help your child. There are books that you can read about how you can help your child. The list of resources at the end of this publication lists books and Web sites that talk about children's fears. These may be helpful to you.

Sometimes children need more help than we can give them. Asking someone to help your children may be the best way for you to help them. The counselor at your child's school might be a good person to ask. There are also therapists in the community who work with children who have fears; play therapists specialize in working with children. A mental health center might have these or other services for children who are scared. Your family doctor or clergy person might also know people in your community who can help your child.

## Resources

### Books about fears for children

It is often easier to read about other people's fears than to talk about your own. You and your child can read books about feelings or about specific kinds of fears. You can go to the library and ask for books on fears, or you may want to go a bookstore or look for books on the Web. Here are some books about specific fears that you can read with your child.

- Brown, M.W. (1970). *Goodnight Moon*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. (Sleeping; ages 2-5)
- Brown, M.W. (1972). *The Runaway Bunny*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. (Separation; ages 4-8)

- Edwards, P.D. (1999). *The Worrywarts*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers. (General worry; ages 4-8)
- Fitzpatrick, M. (2000). *Lizzy and Skunk*. New York, NY: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, Inc. (General worry; ages 4-8)
- Hendry, D. (1999). *The Very Noisy Night*. New York, NY: Puffin Books. (Dark; ages 3-8)
- Henkes, K. (2000). *Wemberly Worried*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books. (General worry; ages 4-8)
- Hest, A. (2001). *Kiss Good Night*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press. (Dark; ages 4-8)
- Mayer, M. (1968). *There's a Nightmare in My Closet*. New York, NY: Puffin Books. (Dark; ages 4-8)
- Mayer, M. (1987). *There's an Alligator under My Bed*. New York, NY: Dial books for young readers. (Dark; ages 4-8)
- Penn, A. (1993). *The Kissing Hand*. Washington, DC: Child and Family Press. (Separation; ages 4-8)
- Stevenson, H. (1997). *Big, Scary Wolf*. New York, NY: Clarion Books. (Dark; ages 4-8)

Also, series like the *Berenstain Bears* (visit the dentist, go to camp, new baby), *Franklin* (has a sleep over) and *Little Bill* (and the big storm) all have stories that deal with different fears. (Ages 4-8)

## Parent resources

These books may be helpful to you as a parent. Many books on parenting have sections about children's fears and address the topic of discipline. Reading them might help you to know how to help your child. The Web sites can give you more information about children's fears and different discipline techniques.

### Books addressing children's fears

- Garber, S., Garber, M.D. & Spizman, R.F. (1993). *Monsters under the Bed and Other Childhood Fears: Helping Your Child Overcome Anxieties, Fears, and Phobias*. New York, NY: Villard Books. (User friendly; easy to read. A great resource. Individual chapters deal with specific fears. Practical and concrete suggestions.)
- Greenspan, S. (2002). *The Secure Child: Helping Our Children Feel Safe and Confident in an Insecure World*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing. (How to help your children feel safe. Academic but practical.)

## Books addressing discipline and fears

- Eisenberg, A., Murkoff, H., & Hathaway, S. (1994). *What to Expect the Toddler Years*. New York, NY: Workman. (Popular book on raising children. Includes basic information on fears and discipline.)
- Leach, P. (1997). *Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five* (3rd ed. revised). New York, NY: Knopf. (Comprehensive resource on parenting up to age 5. Includes information on fears and night terrors, discipline and guidance.)

## Internet resources about children's fears:

- Oesterreich, L. (1999). *Understanding Children: Fears*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from National Network for Child Care Web site: <http://www.nncc.org/Parents/uc.fears.html>.
- Temke, M. (1996). *The 3-, 4- and 5-Year-Old Child: Common Fears*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from University of New Hampshire Extension Web site: [http://ceinfo.unh.edu/Family/Documents/ec345\\_fear.pdf](http://ceinfo.unh.edu/Family/Documents/ec345_fear.pdf).
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2003). *The Anxious Child: Facts for Families*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from Cyfernet: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/anxious.htm>.

## Internet resources on discipline

- Goddard, H. (2003). *Good Ways and Bad Ways to Use Time Out*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from

Cyfernet: [http://www.arfamilies.org/family\\_life/parenting/good\\_ways\\_and\\_bad\\_ways\\_to\\_use\\_time\\_outs.asp](http://www.arfamilies.org/family_life/parenting/good_ways_and_bad_ways_to_use_time_outs.asp)

- Oesterreich, L. (1994). *Disciplining Your Toddler*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003 from National Network for Child Care Web site: <http://www.nncc.org/Parent/uc.disctod.html>.
- Oesterreich, L. (1999). *Understanding Children: Temper Tantrums*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from Cyfernet: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1529J.pdf>.
- Riley, D. (2000). *Five Keys to Good Discipline with Infants*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from Cyfernet: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/babies/BE362.html>

## Internet resources on war and terror

- Ebata, A. (2003). *Talking with Children about War*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from Cyfernet: <http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/familylife/war.htm>
- Gnatuk, C., Lesueur, A., Fitzpatrick, B., & Quick, S. (2003). *America at War: Rising above Fear and Prejudice*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from Cyfernet: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/AmericaAtWar/article4.htm>.
- Myers-Walls, J.A. (2002). *Talking to Children about Terrorism and Armed Conflict*. *Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 7 (1). Retrieved January 2004 from <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/2002w/myers-wall.html>.

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- Greenspan, S. (2002). *The Secure Child: Helping Our Children Feel Safe and Confident in an Insecure World*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Muris, P., Merckelbach, H., Gadet, B., & Moulart, V. (2000). *Fears, worries, and scary dreams in 4- to 12-year-old children: Their content, developmental patterns and origins*. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* 29(1), 43-52.
- Oesterreich, L. (1999). *Understanding Children: Fears*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from National Network for Child Care Web site: <http://www.nncc.org/Parents/uc.fears.html>.
- Smith, C. (1992) *Fear and Courage*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from Cyfernet: [http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc16\\_fear.courage.html](http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc16_fear.courage.html).
- Temke, M. (1996). *The 3-, 4- and 5-Year-Old Child: Common Fears*. Retrieved on May 28, 2003, from University of New Hampshire Extension Web site: [http://ceinfo.unh.edu/Family/Documents/ec345\\_fear.pdf](http://ceinfo.unh.edu/Family/Documents/ec345_fear.pdf).