

Helping Kids Overcome Their Fears and Phobias

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Children love the fantasy and fun of dressing up in costumes and Halloween is usually an exciting and fun event for them. During October, however, the television networks begin running their annual horror flicks. Remember, young children still have trouble differentiating real life from make believe and many scary movies should be “off limits.” A number of children have developed deeply rooted fears from watching movies that were too adult and scary. It can also be upsetting for children to see adults wearing terrifying masks or costumes. So enjoy the whimsy of the Halloween holiday but protect kids from the scary sights and sounds that could upset them.

By nature, some children seem to have more fears than others. When the word “fear” is used correctly, it refers to the feeling experienced in response to a tangible danger, such as a speeding car or an angry dog. “Phobias” are excessive or exaggerated fears of specific objects or situations. Common childhood fears (or phobias) include a fear of the dark, dogs, heights, spiders, and storms.

Jean Piaget is well known for his research regarding children’s cognitive development. He calls ages two to four the “preoperational period” of development. It is characterized by reason being dominated by perception. This explains why preschoolers are often afraid of the dark and imaginary creatures such as monsters.

Piaget’s research revealed that around the age of six or seven, children’s thinking begins to become more logical. Not surprisingly, around this age, children usually lose their fear of imaginary creatures but may become worried about other types of things such as school performance and social relationships. Encourage your children to tell you about their fears. If your child’s fear is having a negative impact on his life, there are steps you can take to help your child overcome it early on.

Many adult fears begin in childhood. Completely avoiding feared objects and activities tends to increase rather than diminish the level of fear associated with them. We can see many examples of this—a fear of drowning is not likely to lessen by avoiding water; a fear of flying is not going to go away by avoiding airplanes; and a fear of school is not going to go away by allowing a child to stay home.

Children often generalize their fears. For example, a child is likely to think that all dogs are mean and unfriendly after a frightening experience with just one dog. A friendly golden retriever may happily approach a child with his tail wagging, but the child with a fear of dogs is likely to perceive the dog as a mean animal that is coming to attack. If a fear is not overcome, a child may begin to generalize it further and develop phobias about other types of animals in addition to dogs.

Some fears must be confronted and dealt with because they will interfere with a child’s daily life. Other phobias may not have to be confronted very often. Even when that is the case, beware that you can unwittingly teach your children to have the same phobias that you have. My husband and I have a rat phobia. I have generalized my fear to include opossums, hamsters, gerbils, and other rodents. Years ago, when we had a pet rabbit, he could even give me the creeps! While it seemed to me that I was only being a conscientious mother by passing along the dangers of rats to my daughter, when she screamed and came running out of her first-grade classroom in a panic because the teacher had a pet rat, I realized that I had probably overdone it.

Much more so than the actual events themselves, children’s reactions to fear and anxiety will affect the quality of their lives, both emotionally and physically. Their response can lead to personal growth, or it can impair that emotional growth. When children respond to the emotions of fear and anxiety by becoming stressed, it can affect their ability to be happy and experience pleasure. Because we cannot control all of the things that will happen in our children’s lives, it’s important for us to help them learn healthy ways to cope.

Reactions to fear can include: shortness of breath, fast breathing, a racing heart, a tightness in the chest, a lump in the throat, butterflies in the stomach, lightheadedness, dizziness, shaking, trembling, tingling feelings, a surreal feeling that things seem strange and tightening muscles.

Steps to Overcoming Fears and Phobias:

1. **Learn relaxation and self-calming skills** such as progressive relaxation, breathing techniques, and visualization.
2. **Desensitize your child.** By gradually exposing your children to their fears, you will be helping them to take progressive steps toward overcoming them.
3. **Clear up misconceptions.** Many fears are based on misconceptions. For instance, many children are afraid of thunder, but if you explain what it is the fear will begin to give way to curiosity.

Dubbed “The Dream Maker” by People magazine, Patti Teel is a former teacher and the creator of an award winning relaxation audio series for children. Her book, *The Floppy Sleep Game*, gives parents techniques to help their children relax, deal with stress and fall asleep. She is a popular speaker and presents innovative workshops for parents, children, and health professionals. Get R&R tips and sign up for her newsletter at www.pattiteel.com. You can listen to her online radio show at www.timeoutwithpattiteel.com.