

Helping Your Child Manage Their Insecure Behaviors

Many children have fearful moments that are logical reactions to scary or uncertain situations. Although fears are learned, there are instinctual fears of loud sounds, loss of balance, or sudden motion. Children can experience terror or fright over a large number of things or situations. When an irrational fear persists, the term phobia is used.

Fears may become a means of influencing or manipulating others. At times, the child may use fear to gain attention. This pattern directly reinforces the child for having fears. The down side to this is the fear can become rewarding and painful at the same time. It is particularly strong when fear is the only way for children to influence or control parents. When the parents try to calm the child it becomes a pattern, with parents experiencing failure in accomplishing their goal. One good example of this is school phobia. Children protest and don't want to attend school, and the result is that parents allow them to stay home. If the child has a good time staying at home this patterned is strengthened. As with other childhood problems, the original reason for the fear developing may lose its effectiveness, but the fear has become a habit.

There are situations at home that can lead children to become fearful. Excessive scolding so children anticipate negative reactions from parents can produce fears of school performance. Similarly, perfectionist parents often have fearful children, who cannot meet parent demands and become afraid to try; afraid to perform lest they might fail.

Parents can do many things to help their children cope with stress and fears. Think of childhood as a time of continuous preparation for life. During a child's development they will experience times of uncertainty where they will need ample amounts of explanation, reassurance, and forewarning of possible difficulties. Play is used by children to practice how to handle both feelings and events; it is a natural means of learning how to handle fear. Using books is an effective way to help children with typical stressors such as operations, death of a relative or pet, divorce, etc.

A positive parenting strategy is to promote assertive behaviors as an effective means of dealing with the environment. Overprotection should be avoided. Children should be encouraged to actively deal with the feared object. It is not wise to remove the feared object, instead teach the child mastery and caution. Discuss situations with your child and be empathic and supportive. Love and respect enhance security. A nonjudgmental and respectful attitude towards fear is communicated. Even the comment, "kids often have scary thoughts; it's the way you grown and learn how to handle different ways of feeling." Discuss any thought

or event that scares your child as soon as possible. Help your child to minimize not exaggerate or distort his understanding of the cause and meaning of the fear. His understanding and growing ability to deal with fears should be praised. It can be helpful to assist your child to learn to distinguish between realistic concerns and unrealistic fears. Since fears are real to children, they cannot be shamed out of them.

Often children discuss their fears at bedtime. Bedtime should be a pleasant, relaxed time and not rushed or tense. Use the time to discuss positive things, telling stories or reading time. Discuss fears hours before they go to sleep. Partially open doors, a dim light near the bed, or a flashlight may be comforting to children. A natural counter-conditioning process is the preventative for the fearfulness. Gradual exposure, serves to slowly condition them to handle mild fear and to take more risks. You can have your child walk down a long dim hall to give them children practice in being less fearful. Each time, less and less support will be necessary.

Encourage your child to share concerns openly. If they see a movie you can say that it was scary and that they might feel funny for a while. Children need to hear that it is okay to be scared and that many fears pass with time. They want and deserve some sympathy for their fears. It is also helpful when talking to your child about their fears to model for them calmness, adequacy and optimism. If you feel that things are okay, the feeling is projected. A relatively optimistic, calm approach leads to handling fears well and to no overreactions.

Reward bravery. Praise for each step and give concrete rewards. Teach positive self-talk. "I can take it; I'm getting braver. It'll soon be over; everything will be fine. Monsters are just in movies; nothing will happen to me. Thunder can't hurt me; I'll just enjoy the storm." They can learn to think 'stop" and immediately say a positive comment to themselves. The "I can't help it" feeling can be replaced with a more positive course of action.

You can teach your child how to learn to relax their body each night. Show them how to relax each muscle in their body and with practice they will do it automatically. If you wish you can let them have a relaxing warm bath to do this.

Feel free to contact me if your child is having trouble falling asleep, therefore suffering during the day,