

Overcoming Children's Fears: Helpful Tips for Parents

All children experience fear at some time in their lives. Toddlers may exhibit fear with separation from parents, loud noises, when potty training or at bedtime. Preschool children can feel fear with being afraid of the dark, thinking there are monsters in their closets, or not wanting to go to bed. School-aged children can experience feeling afraid when faced with new situations, meeting new people, fearing the loss of a parent or not fitting in with peers.

Fear is often a normal response to new tasks and challenges within stages of development and when exposed to environmental changes. In most cases, with support, comfort, and reassurance from caregivers and with positive experiences of perceived fearful events, childhood fears are diminished over time.

Here are some helpful tips for parents to help their children deal with fear:

Respect and understand the child's fears and feelings. It is important to talk about the child's fears, identify any triggering events and reassure in a positive way that you will help to make things better. Avoid put downs such as "don't be a baby" or invalidating statements such as "pet the dog, there is nothing to be scared of." You must be responsive to your child's feelings and their need for caution.

It is important to avoid being over-protective of your child: don't let them avoid what makes them fearful. Encourage your child with your support to tackle tasks or try new things since the end result can be a positive one. Allow your child to challenge their fears at a comfortable pace versus forcing them to make steps they are not ready to make. Parents may need to push a little harder for some children that refuse to make any moves, but do so in a supportive way. Support with praise and encouragement such as "you can do it" and recognition for success such as "you did awesome...I knew you could do it". Remind your child of past fearful episodes that they overcame and help them build a basis for self-confidence through their own successes.

Show your child how to handle feelings of fear by using deep breaths, saying a prayer, singing a song, or using their imagination to turn something scary into something funny. Your child may also benefit from a nightlight, reading a children's book about a scary situation with a happy ending, or having a special routine or comfort item at bedtime. When exposing your child to a fearful object or event it is important to keep the exposure in small doses. It is important to avoid forcing a child into fearful situations all at once. Hold your child close, speak in a soft calm voice - comfort and reassurance can be essential to helping a child when feeling fearful about a situation or event.

How one responds or reacts to your child's fears can greatly influence how they can handle these situations in the future. As a parent it is important to build your child's self-confidence and self-esteem to help them feel they can overcome fears and be proud of their successes.

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