

Dealing with Childhood Fears

Fears are common during early childhood, when children often blend what is imaginary and real. Because children have difficulty controlling impulses (like anger) at this age, they may worry that others do also. Think about whether some of the following suggestions may be helpful for your child's fears.

- Listen to what your child says makes him afraid, and think about how it might reflect stress in his life, especially at child care or preschool, and ask about it.
- Play act some of your child's fears, with your child acting as the scary thing and you playing the role of a scared child, or have your child act out her fears using dolls, puppets, or action figures. If she is afraid of loud noises, encourage her to make even louder noises in play.
- If your child is scared of something specific like airplanes, read about them, make a scrapbook of airplane pictures, go see some at an airport or museum, make up plays about them, tell jokes about them, and so on, to help him gain control and understanding.
- Offer positive reinforcement for any attempts to overcome fears by praising your child each time. Consider reinforcing attempts further with a small reward.
- Assess whether television violence may be contributing to your child's fears. Television violence can make children scared, even if they want to watch it and they say it does not scare them.
- Violence, including arguing, in the home is often frightening. Children worry that their parents will get hurt or upset, or will even leave. If there is violence in your home, talk to your health professional or someone else you trust.
- Reduce pressure for toilet learning. Some children get very worried that they will have an accident. Do not punish or criticize your child if she has an accident.
- Provide clear and safe controls for your child's aggression. Children get very worried if no one stops them from being rough, even if they complain when someone does. Spanking children can also make them frightened and angry, even if they do not show it at the time.
- Offer your child repeated brief explanations of what is real and what is not. Do not make your child ashamed that she is afraid. Think together with her about ways to feel safe. Ideas include spraying her bedroom with "monster spray" or waving a broom at the closets as part of your bedtime ritual to show that you are using your power to protect her.



- Avoid reassuring your child too much. This may alarm him or give him too much attention for reporting fears.
- Provide night lights and special objects like blankets or stuffed animals without criticizing your child for wanting them. Leave a light on at night if she wishes.
- Make a special trip to buy your child a flashlight that he can use to look around the room at night to see that things are all right. This gives him a sense of control over his fears.
- Read or tell your child stories or watch videotapes (such as those listed below) about children mastering their fears.
- If your child is having scary dreams, talk with her about less scary ways the dream might end. Encourage her to think of her dreams ending in positive ways before she goes to sleep at night.
- Learn together about relaxation exercises that your child can use when he is tense. There may be audiotapes at your library that demonstrate such exercises.
- Have a bedtime routine in which you engage in soothing activities in your child’s room, such as reading stories or singing songs. Make this routine short enough so that you can do it the same way every night. Afterwards, stay with your child for a while until she feels relaxed. Promise to come back to check on her in 5 minutes and during the night.
- If your child’s fears continue or start to get in the way of family activities, school functioning, or relationships with friends, ask your primary care health professional for more advice.

RESOURCES

Berenstain S, Berenstain J. 1982. *The Berenstain Bears in the Dark*. New York, NY: Random House.

Emberley E. 1992. *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* Boston, MA: Little Brown.

It’s Sleepy Time. 1993 (videotape). Dallas, TX: Learning Through Entertainment. Part of The Duke Family Series. Available from Learning Through Entertainment. Phone: (800) 237-6889.

Howard BJ. 2002. Fears in early childhood. In Jellinek M, Patel BP, Froehle MC, eds., Bright Futures in Practice: Mental Health—Volume II. Tool Kit. Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

