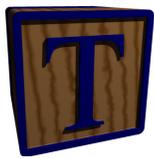


Handling Children's Fears

*And sometimes in my bunk bed I start thinking,
maybe a fiend sneaked into my lower bunk.
And he's sniffing around for a boy to eat,
and I'm the boy that he's sniffing and . . .*

—Judith Viorst, *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things* (New York: Atheneum, 1977)



he world can be a scary place for young children. Things that seem perfectly safe to us look dangerous and harmful to a small child. These fears may seem ridiculous to us, but they are dreadfully real to the child.

Try to see the world through a child's eyes and you can understand why some situations are frightening and why all children are afraid now and then.

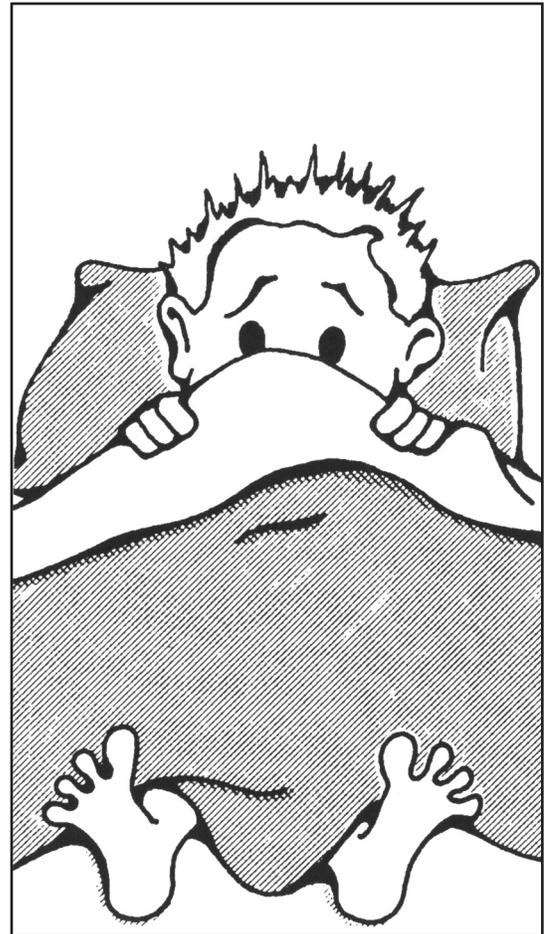
A fearsome beginning

During the first 3 years, life brings one surprise after another. Even such ordinary things as vacuum cleaners and barking dogs can startle a baby. Unfamiliar people and new situations also can be upsetting. Even a person as familiar as a favorite uncle who has grown a beard can confuse a child.

Gradually, however, the real world becomes more familiar, predictable, and secure to young children. When they hear the piercing siren of the fire engine, they know what's making the sound. They can make sense of something new because they've had more experience.

Preschool children are apt to develop a new set of fears. By age 3 or so, children are comfortable with "what is," but they worry about "what could happen." It is difficult for them to separate what's real from what's imagined. They imagine dangers such as monsters coming to hurt children at night. They anticipate disasters such as accidents, wars, or death. For the first time, a child may become afraid of the dark and troubled by nightmares. All of a sudden, a child may worry about something "happening" to his or her body.

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A farewell to fears



Children have different ways of overcoming their fears. Some need to learn all about the situations they fear. These children need to take a special trip to the dentist's office, climb up in the chair, and touch a few of the tools that the dentist will put in their mouths.

Some children need to control the frightening objects themselves. They need to turn the vacuum cleaner on and off. Still other children use their imaginations to combat fear. Pretending to bark and act like a dog can help a child overcome a fear of dogs.

And, it always helps to share a fear with a parent.

A friend in fear



You have a magic all your own to a child. You can forbid lions to sleep under the bed and send them back to the zoo. You can rescue your child from a nightmare and bring him or her back to earth, bed, and safety. The fact is, children believe in you. They are impressed by your courage and peace of mind in the face of such dangers.

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Because your children have such faith in you, you can help them express and overcome their fears. Unfortunately, you also have the power to intensify your children's fears. The way you respond when they are afraid is most important: some ways are helpful; others don't help at all.

Do not . . .

Laugh at children's fears.
Force them into situations they fear.
Ignore children's fears.
Transmit your own fears to your children.

Do . . .

Accept their fears as real.
Remove them from the situation, then talk about it.
Help them confront their fears.
Give them chances to watch other people interact confidently with the things they fear.

Don't be discouraged if your children develop fears no matter how you try to help them. You can't prevent your children's fears, but you can help them face those fears. They need an ally.

The roots of fear

Here are some common fears that trouble children of different ages. In each case, try to imagine how the situation might look from the child's point of view.

Infants and toddlers are apt to fear:

- Their parents are lost forever when they can't see them.
- They will slip down the bathtub drain with the soap bubbles or disappear down the toilet hole.
- Their own father is a monster when he has shaving cream on his face. Or mother may become a stranger in a new hat.
- The vacuum cleaner will eat them up.
- Getting shampoo in their eyes will hurt them.

This fear may be because:

- They haven't learned that people continue to exist when out of sight.
- They haven't developed a sense of what fits into an opening.
- They're apt to pay attention to only one aspect of an object or a person at a time.
- They see it suck up dirt.
- They're right.

Somewhat older children may fear:

- Part of them is being cut off and thrown away when they get a haircut. Or their insides will leak out when they get a shot at the doctor's office.
- A watermelon tree will grow inside them because they swallowed the seed.
- A dog is going to bite them.
- There are monsters in the closet, under the bed, or in the dark.

This fear may be because:

- They are beginning to be aware that their bodies are vulnerable to injury.
- After all, children often are told that babies grow from seeds.
- They know their own teeth bite and they worry other sharp teeth might bite them.
- Their imaginations lead them to be afraid of many things they once accepted calmly.

Remember that parents are a role model. Children can pick up cues about what to be afraid of and when to be fearless. Sometimes parents can best help their children by facing their own fears.

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