

## **My Child is Spooked...Is this Normal?**

If I had to pick one of the most common questions I get from parents it would be, "Is this normal?" Every parent wants to know which behaviors are within the realm of norm and which ones are out of the ordinary and in need of treatment. In celebration of the Halloween season, here's the scoop on common childhood fears, as well as some ways to address them.

We have all experienced fear at some point in our lives. It is an unpleasant emotion that occurs in response to a perceived or real threat. Fears are very common in children. Almost all children experience fear at some point in their development. It is a normal emotion that helps warn of possible danger and assists with developing adaptive coping skills.

Certain fears in children tend to be age-specific and transient, with common fears at different ages. When children are very young, it's hard for them to discriminate between fantasy and reality. The imagination expands rapidly and the fears creep in. All the monsters on TV become real. Halloween time becomes especially frightful as children are bombarded with scary costumes, commercials, frightful decorations, and talk about ghosts and witches. As children get a little older, those monsters may not be free-floating, but may be in specific places like the attic or basement. For many children when the lights go out, the creatures creep in. Any little sound or shadow can become something out there lurking in their room ready to grab them when their parent leaves. Other common fears that may begin for young children, and tend to last for some time, include fear of thunder, animals, and the dreaded doctor or dentist.

After age seven common fears are related to school, bodily injury, getting lost, natural disasters, social anxiety, and performance anxiety. Children also express fears about something bad happening to their parents. They may be afraid that you will be involved in a car accident or just a general worry that they will lose you. As children begin to ponder death and realize its permanence, they may become anxious that they or someone they love may die. This may be especially prominent if they've experienced a recent death in the family.

Many children will outgrow these fears on their own. However, just because these fears are common, doesn't mean you are helpless to address

them. Here are some suggestions for chasing these monsters away a little quicker.

- Monitor media – Avoid scary media overexposure. This includes images from movies, video games, music, videos, internet websites, and television news stories. Monitoring these activities especially before bedtime is very important if you want your child to sleep well in their own bed. Even better, teach your kids to “turn off” scary things that they know affect them. Comedy shows and good bed time stories are a much better choice for night time activities.
- Share worries as a family – Putting worries into words makes it more manageable. If you catch the worries early enough, sometimes you can prevent them from spiraling out of control. You can use reassurance, clarify misconceptions, and answer questions. Sometimes children are afraid to express their fears because they know they are irrational. Helping to normalize fears as something all people experience will open up communication lines.
- Bibliotherapy – This means reading books that deal with the targeted fear. Children can often identify with the character that shares the fear and they can feel comforted by the fact that other people share the same fear. They may also be able to incorporate the characters fear reducing strategy into their own.
- Use powerful mantras – Don’t underestimate the power of words. Try to create fear reducing self-statements that help your child stay positive in the face of fear. For example, “everything will be ok.,” “I can handle this”, “it’s no big deal”, and “I’m safe in my bed.”
- Relaxation strategies - Fear produces tense feelings in the body. You cannot be relaxed and tense at the same time. By participating in relaxation strategies you are automatically reducing tension. Stress reduction strategies to be used include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, calming visualizations, and soothing music.
- Power of imagination - The same imagination that can create a fear, can also help reduce it. Think up a superhero that comes to the rescue to chase off the bad guys. Have them imagine the dream they want to have before bedtime so that their thoughts are positive and relaxing before sleep. Create “magic monster spray” and spray areas where monsters are lurking so they go away.
- Give children a sense of control - Help children to brainstorm solutions that work best for them. For example, if they are afraid of

shadows on the wall, a child might say they would like to have a flashlight under their pillow. Or, they may want to move the bed away from the bookcase to get rid of the shadow.

- Don't be afraid to talk about death - When it comes to death, don't be afraid to talk about it (just not at bed time). It's not unusual for kids to worry about people dying. Reassure them that you all will live a long life. Review all the healthy lifestyle habits you have.
- Use statistics and probability - Explain tragedy and disasters in a way that makes children feel less personally threatened. Using statistics and probability, explain that tragedy rarely occurs. Point out that the reason that this information is on the news is because it is not common and in most likelihood will never be experienced by them.

The good news is that most of these typical fears are nothing for you to be scared about! Being scared at times is simply part of being human. Fears are a natural part of how kids learn to understand their environment. All of the above mentioned fears are very common. The only time you may need to seek out treatment is when it does not seem age appropriate, or whether it is significantly impacting a child's ability to function or perform a regular daily activity. For example a two year old may have a fear of the vacuum cleaner, but it would not be an age appropriate fear for a ten year old. The child who talks about scary monsters is not the same as a child who won't come to school because he/she fears there are monsters hiding in the school building. When fears become maladaptive and cause substantial distress, it is then that treatment is advised. So be patient, have no fear, most of these childhood fears will vanish as quickly as they came.

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