



by Karen Stephens

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## Pitfalls to Sidestep When Responding to Childhood Fears

Children struggling with developmental fears are stressed and anxious. And because very young children often have illogical fears (from an adult's point of view, that is) parents feel at a loss as to how to respond. How do we help kids overcome their fears?

It seems like an endless process; just as children hurdle one fear, another crops up to take its place! If not chosen wisely, reactions to children's fears can actually be counter-productive.

Childhood fears usually follow a predictable progression. It starts with loud noises, shifts to strangers, and then bedtime monsters that lurk with dust-bunnies under beds and in dark closets. Before long, kids face separating from parents and worries about making friends at child care. And next? Well, kids have to face fear of school failure and the not-so-subtle competition of popularity contests as classmates form cliques.

Each step your child takes beyond home includes many joys, but also many unknowns. That's when fears surface. If fears are ignored or repressed, rather than frankly addressed, they hold children back emotionally and socially. Being consumed by fear can keep children from taking part in the wide variety of experiences they need as they prepare for an independent and happy life.

The intensity and endurance of kids' fears can try the most patient of souls. Trying to fathom childhood fears can be confounding and nerve-wracking. (Or haven't you noticed?) Parents endlessly grapple with self-doubt. Haven't questions like these haunted you? "Is Chantal clinging to fears because I'm overly protective and indulgent?" "Is my husband right when he says little Marco is just conning me for attention?" "Thirty years from now, will Cally tell a psychologist I raised her to be a wimp?!" And when it comes to an anxious parent's self-analysis, this is only a slight exaggeration: "If I press Brian too hard to get over his potty fears, will he end up being our family's first on the 'Most Wanted' list?"

What is a parent to do? You don't want to be harsh and unfeeling, but then, you don't want to be overly permissive either. Yes, raising kids can be a conundrum. The good news is, you don't have to go to either extreme! In fact, extreme responses often create more problems than they solve. For instance, some parents choose to be tough and no-nonsense by laughing in the face of kids' fears. But that backfires, undermining children's self-confidence, leaving them ashamed and riddled with self-doubt.

On the flipside, if we're overly gullible and give in to kids' fears, we risk making them timid and overly dependent on us. Coddling and completely shielding kids from fear can buy temporary peace and quiet; but it essentially abandons children midstream in the coping process. Abandoned children stall, treading water rather than moving forward in their development.

Luckily, coping with kids' fears isn't an either-or proposition; there is a middle ground. In this column I'll point out pitfalls to AVOID when dealing with

childhood fears. They are parent and caregiver strategies I've either witnessed or students (child care as well as college) have shared with me. When you read them, think about how they could undermine children's ability to grapple with fears in a dignified, constructive way.

#### **Pitfalls to Avoid When Responding to Childhood Fears**

- Telling the child he is being silly and there isn't anything to be afraid of.
- Insisting that your child isn't "really" afraid, just tired and cranky.
- Inferring your child is dumb by commenting she is "too smart" to be frightened.
- Implying that only "babies" are afraid of things.
- Belittling and humiliating the child: "Why don't you act your age? Grow up or I'll give you something to be scared about."
- Accusing your child of "pretending" to be afraid because they are just jealous of the baby.
- Suggesting your child is acting like a "spoiled brat" by giving into fears.
- Overwhelming your child by grilling him with endless questions about his fear.
- Insisting child show "proof" of her fear, such as immediately producing a "monster."
- Unkindly comparing your child to siblings or cousins who have conquered their fears.
- Letting siblings or playmates tease and "joke" about your child's fear; for instance, let them put a snake or spider in your child's face.
- Allowing others to call your child names, such as chanting "scaredy cat."
- Insisting your child is "crazy" or (and I really did hear this) "retarded" for having a fear.
- Reading scary, gory stories to your child, especially just before nap and bedtime.
- Watching violent, graphic, and/or monster-based television or movies when kids are awake.
- Watching the evening news at dinner time and never discussing the scenes of war, crime, or disaster.
- Dismissing or ignoring fears, such as not allowing a night light during bedtime darkness.
- Using punishment, such as threats or spankings, if a fear isn't mastered immediately.
- Inferring family shame if a fear isn't renounced — "No child of mine is growing up to be a sissy. Straighten up, NOW."
- Implying abandonment if feelings are expressed — "Stop that crying or we'll all go on that carnival ride without you."
- Using humiliation, telling your child she'll go back to crib sleeping if she's afraid of monsters under her big-girl bed.
- Confusing your child, such as agreeing that there are monsters in the house, talking to them and offering them a seat on the sofa as you watch television.
- Threatening loss of face, such as telling your child that Grandpa will be so disappointed in him.
- Not allowing any talk of fears or giving up on your child by withdrawing.
- Failing to censor adult conversations about crime and natural disasters when within earshot of children.
- Failing to explain scary events in simple terms children can understand.
- Allowing children to witness verbal, emotional, and physical abuse.

In Parenting Exchange library column, "Fears Are a Normal Part of Children's Development" I list typical fears children confront. There are very constructive ways to respond to those fears. In Parenting Exchange column, "Tips for Helping Children Tangle With Developmental Fears" I share productive, helpful responses.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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