



by Karen Stephens

Fears Are a Normal Part of Children Growing Up

You've heard it before, but you don't quite believe it's true — it's a predictable and normal development for kids to occasionally be caught in the grim grip of fears. In fact, it's unusual for a child to NEVER show signs of some kind of fear. If your little one has a fear or two, don't worry, you have a standard-issue child on your hands. Don't panic; wrestling with fear doesn't automatically mean a child needs psychological help. It just means they're addressing new issues as their world broadens beyond the safe, secure, and controllable confines of home.

Childhood fears aren't automatically a bad sign; many fears are downright desirable. In fact, fear plays a major role in children's survival. Kids fearing busy streets or a charging dog are experiencing understandable responses. As children grapple with age-appropriate fears, the process helps them develop a greater sense of independence and autonomy. They learn to master self-help skills that keep them safe and healthy. Once children conquer developmental fears, they gain self confidence and pride in their growing maturity.

Children have rational fears, as well as irrational ones. Responding to them requires parents to be patient and understanding. It helps to look at the fear from your child's point of view. Based on your child's age, experience, and reasoning ability, you can then guide them in coping with fears and the associated stress.

Below I've listed typical fears by age groups, but rule of thumb dictates that each child is unique. And each child considers it their solemn duty to throw parents a curve ball from time to time. (To keep family life interesting, don't you know.) So don't assume your child has severe problems if his particular brand of fear doesn't appear on this list. Also keep in mind that fears can bridge age groups. For simplicity's sake, I've listed fears for typical age ranges.

Typical Fears Children Experience

Young Infants

- Loud and unexpected noises
- Falling, including being dropped
- Heights
- Hard textures or touches

Six Months Old to Age 3 Years

- Strangers, including new men with beards
- Separation from parent
- Large animals
- Disguising apparel, such as masks or hats
- Toilet flushing
- Falling into toilet
- Clowns or science fiction creatures
- Water, especially going under water
- Going to a new child care center

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Ages 3 to 6 years

- Being left alone
- Being forgotten by parent
- Insects, especially stinging ones
- Death of parent
- Getting lost
- Being physically hurt
- Complete darkness
- Robbers
- Unpredictable sounds, such as bird tapping on bedroom window
- Loud, unusual noises like tornado sirens
- Imaginary creatures, such as monsters
- Animals, especially large ones like dogs
- Medical personnel
- Violent weather, like thunderstorms
- Swimming pools, even shallow ends

Ages 6 to 12 Years

- Death, their own, a pet's, or a family member's
- Not having friends
- Germs and "cooties"
- Being teased, ridiculed, or humiliated
- Failure in meeting parent expectations
- Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tornadoes
- Animals, especially reptiles, rodents
- "Ugly" insects, like spiders and cockroaches
- Being wounded or hurt in play

- Being kidnapped
- Home invasion and robbery
- Medical procedures, such as shots or operations
- Dental procedures such as Novocain shots and cavity drilling
- Devil, ghosts, vindictive God, and other supernatural concepts
- "Peeping toms" looking into windows
- Shootings and stabbings
- Automobile accidents
- Loss of parent, due to death or a divorce
- School failure
- Starting school

Age 12 Years and Older

- Academic failure
- Disappointing parents
- Emotional and social rejection from peers
- Embarrassment in front of peers
- Physical imperfections, including acne and overweight
- War, nuclear or otherwise
- Bombings, terrorism, and random violence
- Random gun shooting
- Criminal assault, including domestic violence and rape
- Death
- Moving to a new home and community

Once you identify fears that are typical for your child's age, turn to our other Parenting Exchange columns to learn of pitfalls to avoid when responding to children's fears. There are also columns that share tips for teaching children positive ways for grappling with their fears.

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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