

Helping Children Cope with fears and worries

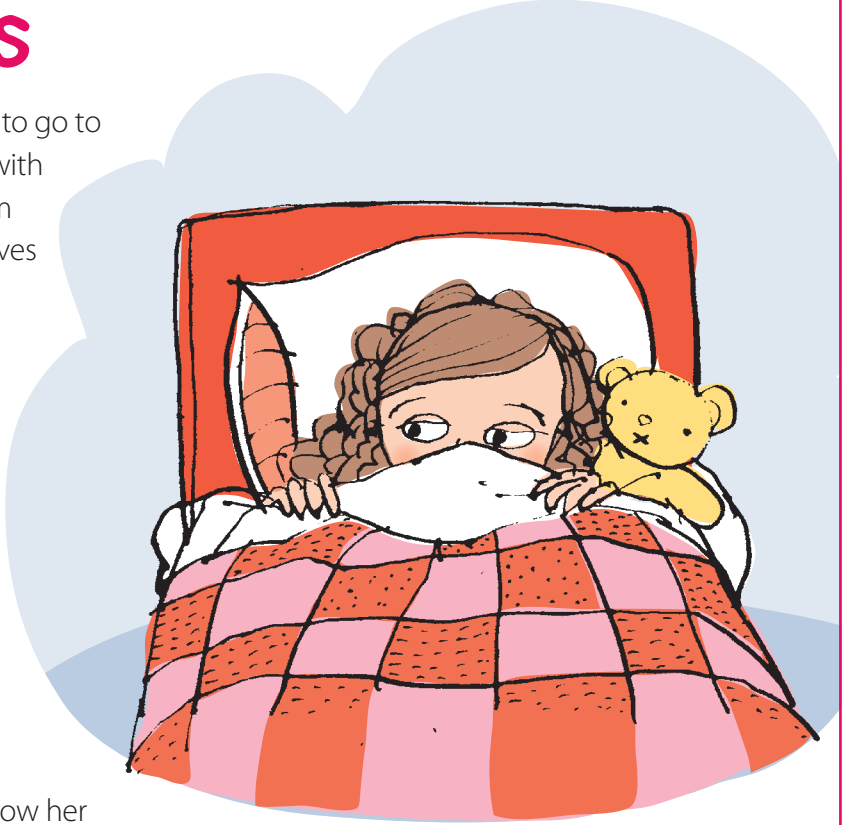
Six year old Jessica doesn't want to go to sleep in her own bed. "You stay with me Mum", she says. Jessica's Mum reads another story. Her Mum gives her one more kiss and leaves.

A few minutes later, Jessica appears in the doorway. "I'm scared something might happen to the house. The roof might blow away."

Mum: "Nothing's going to happen to the house."

Jessica: "But I saw it on TV."

Jessica had not seemed to be bothered about the TV before. Now her parents realise she must have become worried after seeing TV news items about recent storms.



Understanding children's fears

Children get scared for all sorts of reasons. Often their fears seem unreasonable to adults. But even what may seem illogical to adults, can be very real to children.

Some fears are very common amongst children, with different sorts of fears appearing at different ages. Preschool children are often afraid of imaginary things like monsters hiding under the bed. In early primary school children are usually more fearful of real things that might happen, like being hurt. Later fears are more typically about possible failure at school or in sport.

Noticing when children are afraid

It's not always easy to tell when a child is frightened or worried. Obvious things that the child responds to immediately, like thunder, are easy enough to recognise. But some things are not as obvious. Children may not tell you they are scared. Often they show it through their behaviour instead.

When children are scared or worried they may:

- become clingy or demand that a parent or carer stay close to them
- have sleeping difficulties or want to sleep in their parent or carers' bed
- lack confidence to do things they did happily before
- avoid situations that make them feel scared or anxious
- ask a parent or carer to do things for them or with them
- complain of tummy aches or headaches.

Helping Children to Cope with Fears

Children need adult support in order to learn to cope with fears. They need reassurance to reduce their anxious feelings, and skills for coping so that they can gradually learn to manage fears themselves.

Learning to cope with fears and worries helps children develop confidence.

How parents and carers can help

- Acknowledge how your child is feeling. Naming it, (e.g. 'feeling scared'), helps the child begin to see fear as a normal emotion that can be overcome.
- Stay cool yourself so you can model positive coping.
- Tell them how you learned to get over fears when you were their age.
- Positive self-talk can help children put fears into perspective. For example, "The storms on TV are far away from here. My house will be O.K."
- Asking what a favourite hero might do in this situation can sometimes be helpful for encouraging children to be brave.
- Learning relaxation skills is often very helpful for dealing with fears.
- Help the child put realistic limits around the scary situation. For example, Jessica's parents could explain that the TV pictures she saw were about something that happens rarely and only when the weather is extreme.
- Since television is a frequent trigger for children's fears it is important to monitor television viewing to minimise exposure to things that may be frightening. It can also help to discuss scary things at the time they are seen on TV.

Further information on children's fears and learning to cope is available in the KidsMatter resource pack at your school on *Helping children cope with fears and worries*.

The following web pages may also be of interest:

http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/fears-young_children_-_cyh.html?highlight=fears#overcome%20fears

www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=141&id=2295

www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/fears.html

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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