

Helping Your Child Cope With Ongoing Fears

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Phobias are fairly common, with many first appearing during childhood or adolescence. They can develop after a traumatic event or when a person creates an illogical association between a thought and a situation, for example: “I feel afraid of getting on this plane so this plane must be dangerous.” Or phobias can develop for no reason at all.

Many children or teens voice these fears outright. Others might withdraw or exhibit signs of a panic—sweating, trembling, rapid heartbeat or shortness of breath. Some children develop chronic headaches or stomachaches in an attempt to avoid anxiety-producing experiences. Others may have nightmares.

When fears start to interfere with daily life, then we need to teach our children how to cope. If your child is overly afraid, the first thing to do is listen. Let him express his feelings through talking, writing or art. Parents can take other common-sense approaches to preventing or limiting irrational fears:

- Don’t dwell on the negatives. If a child is afraid of sharks, don’t let her watch a television show or movie about sharks. Limit the amount of news children see and watch what you say when they’re present.
- Explain the situation in words he can understand, express your feelings honestly, and don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.”
- Teach your child relaxation exercises.
- Help her feel more in control by involving her in volunteer efforts or activities that build confidence.
- Be a role model. Children notice how you’re reacting.
- Never resort to teasing or ridicule.
- Take every opportunity to point out when things work out well.
- Make sure your child is eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep.

Experts tend to agree that over-active imaginations lie at the root of most phobias. As such, most recommend 2 techniques:

1. confronting the fear through desensitization
2. replacing the frightening thoughts with realistic ones

Confront the fear

If your child is afraid of tall buildings, start by looking at photos of them, read books about them, and discuss the various issues. If your child can handle it, get close to one. The idea is that through gradual, repeated exposure a child will realize that he didn’t get hurt by looking at a skyscraper or

being in one. This process takes patience and time. Don't force a frightened child to do anything she doesn't want to do.

Confront the thought

When we think scary thoughts, we wind up being scared. Help your child challenge the fearful thought. For example, if your child thinks, "This plane is going to crash," tell her that this plane has taken off and returned safely every time it has flown. Mention all the times people they know have flown without incident.

When to seek help

Err on the side of caution and seek help whenever you're uncomfortable or when:

- self-help efforts aren't successful
- fear is chronic and interrupts daily routines
- physical symptoms of anxiety are severe or frequent
- behavior changes for the worse

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