

Counselor's Corner

October 2023

Managing Children's Fears

It's fall now, and with this season and the approaching end of daylight savings time, the darkness appearing earlier and Halloween, it's fitting to address how to deal with fears. It's usually pretty easy for most people to think back to their childhood and list off things they used to be scared of: monsters in the closet, thunderstorms, getting shots, or simply the dark. As caregivers, our instinct is to provide comfort. *See? There are no monsters in the closet, I promise!* But we can't always be there to help calm our child (nor *should* we). Teaching our kids how to manage their fears builds confidence, independence, and resiliency.

Self-regulation

The term self-regulation is much more than controlling our emotions. Instead, it encompasses all of the things we think and do to minimize the unpleasant feelings (down-regulate), increase the pleasant ones (up-regulate), or maintain the ones you want in order to accomplish a goal. When it comes to our children's fears, building these strategies for emotional regulation takes time and practice. This means as parents, we have to be comfortable with allowing kids to be uncomfortable as they figure things out.

Fearing fear

Parents have a natural inclination to help their child when they experience distress. Fortunately, most fears children experience aren't an actual threat, which means it's a great opportunity for them to work on their self-regulation skills. What this also means is parents need to take a step back to examine their own anxiety. Jumping in to help your child be less afraid may work for both you and your kid in the present moment, but the long-term consequence is it makes it more difficult for them to learn how to calm down. If parents continuously assist their children, they have no incentive to learn how to help themselves.

What can you do to help?

First, you can talk to your child about their fears. Avoidance feeds anxiety. Initially we feel relief, but this reinforces the desire to avoid. Asking specific questions can help them to become more aware of and articulate what they are frightened of.



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Upcoming Events

10/3 Hearing & Vision Testing (K, 2nd, 5th)
8:30 am MPR

10/11 Board Meeting
3:30 pm MPR

10/18 Parent Club
6:30 pm via Zoom

10/23 Coffee with the Principal
2:30-3:30 pm Gazebo

10/27 Career Day
8:30 am

10/27 PeaceBuilder Assembly
11:15 am Stage

10/31 Halloween Parade!



Next, you can let your child know that you are taking what they are saying seriously and you aren't dismissing or minimizing their feelings. Validate their fear by saying, "I can see you are really scared about this," "Tell me about what you're thinking," or "It's okay to feel scared." Do your best to avoid using the word "but" (e.g., "You're scared right now, but you'll be fine!"). Although well-intentioned, you may wind up making it harder for your child to accept their own feelings.

Once you have validated the feelings, move forward by talking about how you'll co-create a plan and set realistic goals around the fear. Stay consistent, offer encouragement, and praise your child for their effort around working through their fears. The acknowledgement can help provide your child with the confidence they need to help them feel capable.

When to worry

Sometimes fears can be a symptom of anxiety. It can be beneficial to seek help from a therapist or speak with your pediatrician if the fears and anxieties are not getting better, or it's getting worse. Also, if you're unsure or if you think your child may be worrying to an extreme, it never hurts to ask questions. Anxiety can show up differently for children and adults.

Symptoms of anxiety in children may include the following:

- ◆ Difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Complaints of physical symptoms (stomachaches, headaches) or your child feels breathless, dizzy or sick
- ◆ Constant worrying or having negative thoughts
- ◆ Fears keep your child from doing things, like sleeping or going to school
- ◆ Clinginess
- ◆ Regression in behaviors (e.g., bedwetting when child has previously mastered this skill)
- ◆ Other behavioral changes (moodiness, aggression, temper tantrums, frequent crying spells)

Maintain hope!

Whether your child is experiencing common childhood fears or anxiety, the great news is this is a very workable situation. You can model healthy ways to handle your own fears by allowing your child to see you manage this calmly, tolerate the discomfort and feel good getting through it.