



# Understanding Children

## Fears



To many parents, children's fears make no sense at all. Nevertheless, to children, monsters lurking in the dark or scary noises coming from the attic are quite real.

Around your child's second birthday, he or she may become frightened by things that did not cause fear before—the neighbor's dog, the dark, the bathtub drain, and loud noises.

Several factors contribute to a child developing fears by age 2. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 have experienced real fear or pain from being lost, injured, or bitten. They also have vivid imaginations and struggle with the idea of cause and effect. A toddler knows something about size and shape, but not enough to be sure that he or she won't be sucked down into the bathtub drain or into a flushing toilet. Older children also are aware of dangers that they hear about or see on TV. It's hard to know what is real and what is not.

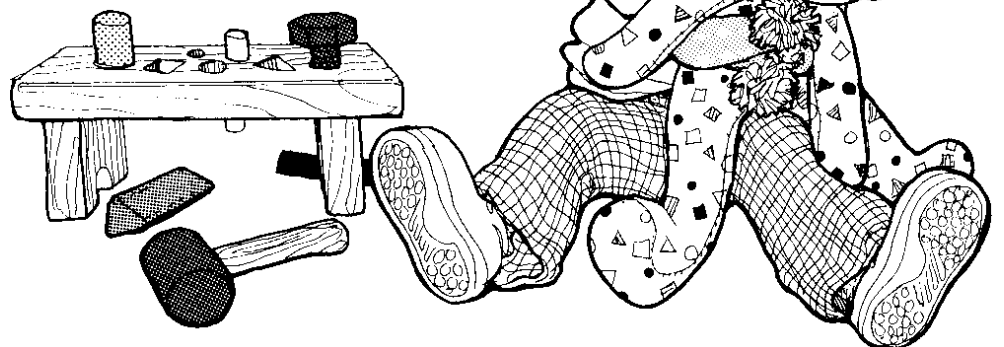
### Common fears

#### Fear of separation

Toddlers' anxiety about separation is an indication of growth. Before your toddler turned 2, he or she forgot you after you left, and settled down quickly. Now your child worries about and puzzles over your departure.

Always tell your child that you are leaving. Sneaking out decreases trust. It may help to get your child absorbed in an activity before you leave. An elaborate ritual of waving bye-bye and blowing good-bye kisses also may help.

Preschoolers are more self-assured than toddlers, but occasionally experience fears about being separated from a parent when starting a new school or child care arrangement, staying overnight with a relative, or moving to a new home. Ease into new situations gradually. Visiting the new school several times before the first day, or staying with your child for the first day or two can make a big difference.



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## Fear of baths

Many young children worry about going down the drain with the water. No amount of logical talk will change this. Avoid letting the water drain out while your child is still in the tub or even in the bathroom. If your child seems fearful of water, you might try letting him or her play first with a pan of water, then in the sink, and finally over the edge of the tub (don't leave a child alone in the bathroom).

## Fear of dogs

Dogs are often loud, fast moving, and unpredictable. Many children fear them. Respect your child's fear of strange dogs; a child's instincts may be right. If you wish to introduce your child to a friendly dog, first try sharing pictures of the dog with your child. Next watch the dog from a distance, and finally approach the dog together. You may want to demonstrate how to pet the dog, but don't force your child to pet the dog, too. If he or she refuses, you can try again later.

## Fear of loud noises

Although your toddler loves to pound on a toy drum, the loud noise from a vacuum cleaner or a hair dryer may be very frightening. Even preschoolers can develop fear of loud noises. Try letting your child look at and eventually touch things in your home before you turn them on.

If the fear seems intense, save "loud noise jobs" for times when your child is rested and in a good mood, or better yet, when he or she is not around.

## Fear of the dark

Parents often sheepishly admit that their child sleeps with a night light (or the room light) on. Children can sleep with lights on without damaging their health. Many children sleep with a night light well into the school-age years.

Fear of the dark is usually one of the last childhood fears to be conquered.

Younger children fear monsters and snakes that lurk in the bedroom shadows. Older children may fear burglars and thieves. It is not at all uncommon for children who are 10 and 11 to still use a night light. A gradual reduction of light works for many families, while some children decide on their own to turn lights off. It is important not to rush your child.

## School-age children have fears too

During the school-age years, imaginary monsters disappear, but other fears begin to surface. School-age children often have to deal with bullies, the fear of rejection or embarrassment, and sometimes the reality of being home alone after school. School-agers also are aware of TV and news events that showcase murder, drug abuse, kidnappings, and burglaries.

About one-third of school-age children experience fears that re-occur. Often these children develop strategies that help them cope. One common strategy children use is to turn the TV on when they arrive home so they don't hear scary noises. Other strategies include hiding under beds or in closets, turning all the lights on in the house, and using the phone for comfort and companionship. Older kids often feel embarrassed about feeling afraid and are reluctant to share their feelings. Asking specific questions like "Do you have a special hiding place? Do you walk home a certain way? When you come home



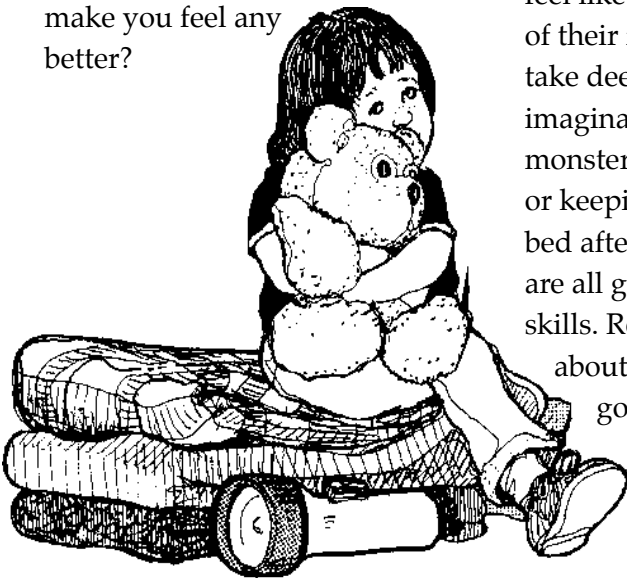
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do you check the doors?" will help parents identify concerns that their children might have. A very elaborate plan for self protection may indicate that the child is feeling threatened and very afraid.

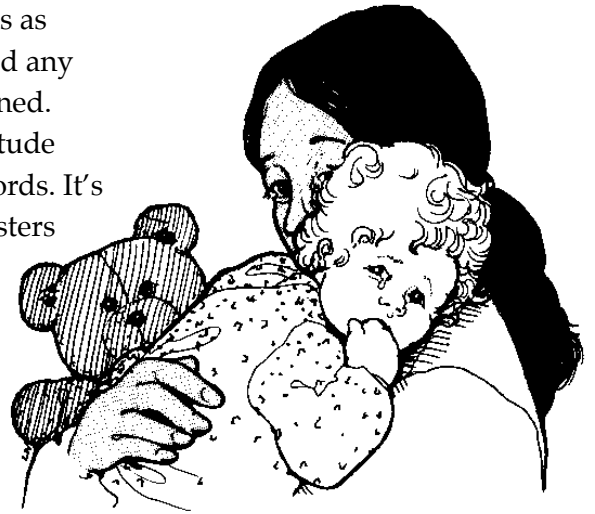
## ■ How parents can help

Your child's fears depend on his or her level of anxiety, past experience, and imagination. If any fears persist, give your child more time and try to avoid events and situations that can trigger them. Your child may be better equipped emotionally to deal with his or her fears in a few months.

- Avoid lectures. It is not helpful to ridicule, coerce, ignore, or use logic. Think back to your own childhood. How often did you hear phrases like: "There is no such thing as a monster," "Don't be such a baby," "There are no lions or bears for miles and miles from here," or "Pet the nice doggie, he won't hurt you." Did statements such as these really make you feel any better?



- Accept your child's fears as valid. Support your child any time he or she is frightened. Use a matter-of-fact attitude and some reassuring words. It's OK to explain that monsters don't really live under the bed, but don't expect your child to believe it. Remember that some fear is good. Children should have a healthy sense of caution. Strange dogs and strange people can be dangerous. As children grow older, they begin to have a better understanding of cause and effect, and reality versus fantasy. They also may gain some first-hand experience with the object of their fear and discover ways to control potentially dangerous situations. Eventually, most fears will be overcome or at least brought under control.
- Show your child how to cope. Young children can learn some coping skills that will help them feel like they have more control of their fear. Learning how to take deep breaths, using their imagination to turn a scary monster into a funny monster, or keeping a flashlight by the bed after lights are turned off are all good examples of coping skills. Reading children's books about scary situations such as going to bed in the dark or having an operation in the hospital also can be helpful. It



is best not to force a child into fearful situations all at once. Often the "shock" method will backfire and intensify the fear. A small dose at a time is the best way to help a child overcome fear.

## ■ A note about nightmares and night terrors

One out of every four children between the ages of 3 and 8 experiences either **night terrors** or **nightmares**. Both of these situations can be unnerving, but are generally short-lived.

*Night terrors* generally occur within an hour of falling asleep. The child awakens suddenly from a state of deep sleep in a state of panic. He or she may scream, sit up in bed, breathe quickly, and stare "glassy eyed." The child also may seem confused, disoriented, and incoherent. Each episode can last from 5 to 30 minutes. A child who experiences night terrors is not aware of any scary thoughts

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or dreams and is usually able to go back to sleep quickly. In the morning, the child usually doesn't remember waking at all. Night terrors may occur for several years. Generally they go away with time and are not an indication of any underlying emotional problems.

*Nightmares* generally occur in the early morning hours. Children who experience nightmares can often recall the vivid details of their scary dream and may have difficulty going back to sleep. Nightmares will often center on a specific problem or life event that is troubling the child.

Parents can help by remaining calm. Hold your child close and talk in a soft, soothing voice. Comfort and reassure your child. If possible, stay close by until he or she falls asleep. Calm, consistent handling of nightmares or terrors will help your child feel safe and secure.

## ■ Books for children

*Are You My Mother?* P. Eastman  
*How Many Kisses Goodnight?* Jean Monrad  
*The Runaway Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown  
*Goodnight Moon*, Margaret Wise Brown  
*Bedtime for Francis*, Lilian Hoban  
*Ira Sleeps Over*, Bernard Waler

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families contact your county extension office and ask for the following publications.

*Understanding Children: Disciplining your toddler*, PM 1529c  
*Understanding Children: Disciplining your preschooler*, PM 1529b  
*Understanding Children: Self-esteem*, PM 1529h  
*Growing into Middle Childhood: 5- to 8-year-olds*, PM 1174a (cost)

Also visit the ISU Extension Web site at:

[www.extension.iastate.edu](http://www.extension.iastate.edu)

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