



by Karen Stephens

Tips for Helping Kids Tangle With Developmental Fears

“My mama says there isn’t any mean-eyed monster with long slimy hair and pointy claws going scritch-scratch, scritch-scratch-scratch outside my window.” Thus laments preschooler Nick, a character every child can relate to in Judith Viorst’s book *My Mama Says There Aren’t Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things*.

Like all children, young Nick wants to believe his mama when she says monsters don’t exist. He’d love to agree. Yet, a nagging thought haunts him: “Sometimes even mamas make mistakes.” And what if this is one of those times? And so, anxious Nick struggles with fears of monster mayhem. By the book’s playful ending, Nick begins to distinguish between his imagination and reality, finally accepting that maybe, just maybe, mama is right after all.

Separating fact from fiction, and real from pretend is a path all children must trudge as they grapple with fears. Depending on our responses, parents and caregivers make the hike rockier or smoother. Although caring for scared children can be unnerving, their coping process actually develops desirable character traits and abilities. Only by experiencing fear can children know what it means to be courageous. Only by facing and working through fear can they develop inner-confidence that leads to self-assurance. As children overcome fear, they develop problem solving skills that support independence and self-reliance.

And there is a bright spot in all this fear talk. Most children’s fears don’t last longer than a few months, if not weeks. An end to struggles isn’t far out of sight — it just seems to be. Following are tips for coaxing children’s coping process along.

Watch Behavior for Clues

Children often don’t tell us the minute something scares them. They harbor fearful feelings until they can’t contain or control them. Behavior changes are usually the first clues to children’s fears. An alert eye can detect and address them early, when they’re more manageable. Avoiding or denying a child’s fear can let it escalate from a typical hurdle to a traumatic experience.

Be a Patient, Approachable Parent

Provide some one-on-one time so your child can openly ask about their fear. If questions don’t surface, there’s another way to root out the problem. If you suspect a fear, broach the subject yourself. The trick is to do so without planting fears that weren’t there in the first place! (There’s always a trick, isn’t there?)

Statements invite dialogue, while point-blank, rapid-fire questions often make kids feel defensive or backed into a corner. To trigger communication, casually mention you’re willing to listen if they have a concern. If you don’t get a response, describe behavior. Suppose your child never wants to leave your side, even to potty. You might say, “I notice lately when you use the bathroom you leave the door open. I was wondering why.” Or if your child begins crying enroute to child care, you can say, “You never used to cry about child care. If something there bothers you, let me know. I may not be able to change it, but I’ll listen to your side.”

By hearing such non-threatening comments, your child learns you’re an approachable parent.

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Don't give up too easily; it's not unusual for kids to guard worries. Kids know fears are considered "babyish," especially if teased by older siblings. Be patient during discussions and allow kids the time they need to open up.

Offer Understanding and Empathy

When children share a fear — whether it seems logical or not — be respectful, accepting, and understanding. (That means keep a straight face no matter what.) Encourage your child to describe their feelings. Respond with vocabulary that sorts out emotions: "Dreaming of a vampire is frightening. I'd be nervous going to sleep, too."

Listening to fears doesn't mean you agree with them. It's simply a way to show support as you get a clearer picture of what your child is thinking and experiencing. By attentively listening, you may discover a good reason for their fear or be able to clear up a misconception that caused it. Grasping a child's viewpoint will help you explore solutions.

During conversations, express empathy by telling your child it's okay to be afraid. If it's true, admit to having the same fear when you were young. (And yes, you had a fear or two. I remember taking a running leap to my bed so the monster underneath couldn't reach my legs with his long octopus arms!)

Be Accepting and Reassuring

Children may express fears so they can be reminded that we'll love and protect them whenever they need it. It never hurts to let them know how serious you are about keeping them safe. Don't worry, reassurance doesn't mean you'll reinforce fears. You can say you personally don't believe in monsters; but even if there were monsters, you'd never ever let one in the house to hurt them.

Accept your child's feelings as real and genuine. Reassure him that he won't always have the fear. Tell him that part of growing up is learning that some things aren't always as scary as we first think.

Confront Fears Gradually

Some believe in cold-turkey methods to "prove" to kids there isn't anything to fear. Take the sink or swim method. I've met well-meaning parents who swear tossing scared-stiff kids into a pool will teach them to love the water. My wise-acher streak responds, "Yea, right, let me push you out of an airborne plane and we'll see how fast you learn to love skydiving."

The cold-turkey approach doesn't work with fear of the dark, either. Some adults actually think keeping kids' bedrooms totally dark or sitting a child in a dark closet with the door closed helps them adjust to the dark. No! Cold-turkey methods simply prove that adults can be as illogical as we accuse kids of being. It's a heartless, inhumane way to treat kids.

Instead, help kids take small steps to gradually master their fears. Stay at the top step of the pool until your child feels comfortable to go to the second step and so on. A small night-light in a room takes the scary edge off darkness. Let kids go down small slides before tall ones. Have them watch a dog from afar until they develop the courage to pet it on their own terms, at their own pace. Have a warm up visit before leaving your child alone at a new child care care.

You get the idea. Inch by inch kids do overcome fears. Rushing and pushing simply conflicts and prolongs the coping process until it becomes excruciating

In Parenting Exchange column, "More Strategies to Help Children Cope With Fears," I share more productive tips for sensitively supporting children.

Book Citation

- *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things* by Judith Viorst (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).

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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