



by Karen Stephens

## More Strategies to Help Kids Cope With Fear

Children are by definition inexperienced — and they don't have very much control over circumstance. They have lots to learn about the world and they know it. For kids, the newness and unpredictability of life can be exciting, enticing, and invigorating.

But there are other times when children are downright scared. They know they're vulnerable and need adult protection. Even as they adamantly proclaim they're a BIG boy or girl, deep down they depend on others to protect them from their real and imagined fears. More often than not, that protector will be — and should be — you.

Kids never count on us more than when fears paint monster-shadows in dark rooms and send chills down developing spines. By patiently helping them, we prove that we cherish them. This column offers suggestions for responding to children's fears. Some will work great; others may not. Based on your child's unique personality, pick and choose which will most likely help.

### **Fears May Have a Physical Rather Than Psychological Cause**

Children's fears can be managed more easily when their cause is identified. Sometimes that's possible, sometimes not. When identifying causes of fears, try not to jump to conclusions too fast.

Sometimes expression of fear is a child's bid for attention, but not usually. If a fear continues and your child doesn't respond to emotional reassurances, try to rule out a physical cause for the fear.

Most physical roots of fears relate to constipation or upset stomach from eating a new food. However, sometimes fears can arise from discomfort of a fever or a child's physical reaction to illness, such as chills or light-headedness.

Changes in the physical environment can trigger children's fears, too. For instance, sounds of a neighborhood dog barking can alarm children, especially if awakened during a tense dream. Even the sounds from a new household appliance can startle children, for instance, when a new air conditioner or furnace turns on.

### **Prepare for Unexpected Individual Reactions**

There's a book I recommend for children afraid of bedtime monsters. It's *Clyde Monster* by Robert Crowe. Most kids love its turnabout humor and parents enjoy the reverse psychology. Clyde, a child-monster, worries endlessly of humans lurking in the dark. He's sure a human will jump out from under his bed and scare him! The story ends happily with Mom and Dad Monster reassuring Clyde that humans would never be mean. They even tell him of a pact made in olden times: Monsters promised not to scare humans and humans promised never to scare monsters.

Well, one of my college students eagerly read this book to a niece who was giving her parents fits about monsters. The student and I assumed the book would help the child distinguish between real and imagined fears. But, at book's end, the FIRST thing the niece exclaimed was, "See there, monsters are TOO real!" For that child, the book merely confirmed monsters, rather than refuting them.

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So much for reverse psychology! (And yes, the incident made a ninny out of this college instructor.) Need I say that every child is unique, so be prepared for the unexpected.

### **Use Props to Encourage Discussion**

Sometimes children have trouble verbalizing fears. They balk when put on the spot by direct questions. However, when making up characters with dolls or puppets, kids often open up more easily. Perhaps it will help your child.

When playing make believe casually introduce a character that has the same fear as your child. Watch to see how your child's character responds. Comments may give clues as to how your child is feeling or how you can help. For instance, if your child fears the dark, pretend that a puppet is scared of the dark, too. How does your child's puppet react? Does he beg for the bedroom drapes to be closed? Perhaps your child would find the same thing comforting at night. Ask him at bedtime. If your child says no, at least the communication door is open.

There is a caution to that recommendation. During play, don't be an amateur psychologist by assuming absolutely everything children say represents their own feelings. Kids may simply be wondering about a fear they heard from a friend at the playground. In either case, pretend play gives kids a safe avenue to explore worries and fears.

### **Offer Outlets for Expression**

Expression of thoughts through language — spoken, written, or symbolically drawn — has proven to be a key coping tool for humans. Naming feelings and releasing emotional energy can help us come to terms with concerns and fears. It's long been a practice for parents to listen to children's blow by blow accounts of scary nightmares. Letting kids put fears into words does help them find some relief. However, to overcome repeated nightmares, more may be needed.

Some kids find it helpful to use imagination to change the script of nightmares. Simply suggest they make up, write, or draw a new, positive ending — an ending that makes them feel powerful and in control. Sometimes it does the trick.

### **Respect Children's Change of Mind**

When I taught preschool, a four-year-old girl couldn't wait to have her face painted with clown makeup. She wriggled and giggled as she watched others blossom into colorful clowns. Finally, I designed her dandy face and held up the mirror to show off the results. Then — BOOM — instant tears burst through the flood gates. She wailed, "I disappeared! Take it off! Take it off!" She had changed her mind; the make-up had robbed her identity and it scared her to death.

I could have said, "Don't be silly. You asked for it, now stop being ridiculous and go have fun like the rest of the kids." But why? What would be gained by discounting her feelings? Why refuse her the prerogative of changing her mind? There are other ways to pretend to be a clown. Someday she might like the make-up; but from her four year old vantage point, it made her a non-person. Her soul was hers to keep, so I quickly cold-creamed the paint from her innocent face.

We often refuse kids the right to change their minds. Kids are excited to see Santa (or the Easter Bunny — take your pick). But when they come toe to toe with the huge stranger, they decide it's not such a good idea after all. Yet parents prod them on, despite the child's screams. (And we wonder why little Johnny wets Santa's crimson pants!)

If we really want kids to enjoy experiences, we have to give them more leeway in decisions. Sometimes, it's wise to let them change their minds; it teaches them to trust their own judgment and gut feelings. In a year or two they'll outgrow their fears and be able to enjoy the holiday fantasy. Patient parents give kids time to overcome fears. May such patience be yours.

### **Book Citation**

*Clyde Monster* by Robert Crowe (New York: Penguin Putnam for Young Readers, 1987).

Parenting Exchange Library resource, "Tips for Helping Children Tangle With Developmental Fears" shares beginning tips for parents coping with and responding to children's fears.

**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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