



# Did You Know?



FAMILY SERVICES NEWSLETTER  
Mandala Children's House • Anne Kangas, L.C.S.W.

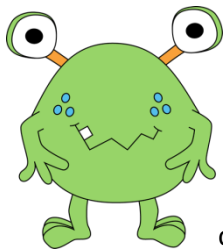
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## Fears Are Normal for Preschoolers

**Have you noticed your child's sudden surge in fears?** Almost *all* preschoolers have common fears such as fear of the dark, fear of snakes, or fear of being left alone. These are healthy fears because they protect children from harm, as long as they do not get in the way of their ability to play, to have friends, and to be reasonably independent for their age. These fears are healthy if they are connected to reality in some way. Extremely sensitive children may become particularly fearful during this time and they may need a parent's extra help to manage their worry.

**Where do these fears come from? Why now?** Fears begin to occur around preschool age because preschoolers are developing the new capacity for active imagination and they are now becoming aware of cause and effect. *"If it is dark, then danger can't be seen. And if it can't be seen, then I can't protect myself."* Or, *"If the little girl on TV could get kidnapped out of her bedroom, then it could happen to me."* They have an increasing awareness of the many ways they can be hurt. Most of all, preschoolers are still very egocentric and see themselves as the center of the world. Therefore, they see dangers as directed at them. Some gifted children can develop extreme fears because of their advanced intellect.

**Preschoolers' have Magical Thinking.** Another factor in young children's fears is their use of magical thinking. All children between the age of three and eight (and even to a lesser degree as they get older) are driven by magical thinking. They believe that if something is wished for hard enough (both good and bad), it will happen. Children believe that they can make something happen with their thinking! They can understand certain facts (fire, war, pollution) but they can't cope with that understanding because they still have the emotions of a young child. Also, they cannot put their knowledge into a larger perspective.



**Children's imagination may be over-stimulated by media images.** Some children, especially highly sensitive children, are easily overwhelmed by visual images. Scary movies and graphic scenes on television can trigger fears in children. They are unable to filter out these images and they do not fully understand that they are either "not real" or not happening in the here and now.

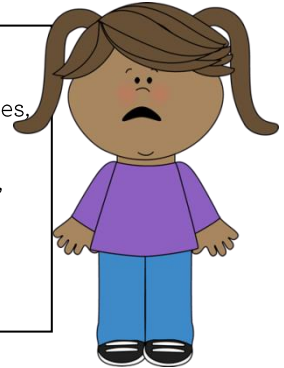
**Painful experiences or exposure can increase children's fears.** Extreme fears can develop for young children when they experience some kind of disturbing event. In most cases, extreme fears are linked directly to a troubling experience, such as fear of fire after seeing a friend's house burn down, fear of earthquakes after surviving one, or fear of being separated from a parent after a hospitalization, divorce, or absence. Children who saw the airplanes hit the towers on television on 9/11 feared it would happen again. Recently, we know many children have developed fears after hearing their parents' talk about their concerns for feeling safe in this country with all the challenges to immigration. Children pick

up adult emotions but do not understand the context. In other cases, the connection may be seem less clear to us as adults, even though it makes perfect sense to a child. For example, a child who has witnessed a violent act may become extremely fearful of the dark.

**Young children project their inner fears outward onto imaginary things.** This is their way of coping with uncomfortable feelings or intense anxiety. In divorce, for example, a child who is furious at his parent for “deserting” him may be fearful of expressing his anger directly. He will instead express his anger as intense fear of “the bad guys” or monsters. In this way, he can safely express anger at his parent, and yet also receive comfort from the very parent he so desperately needs.

#### TYPICAL EARLY CHILDHOOD FEARS

- 2 Years Separation from parent, noises, animals, the dark, large objects or machines, change in environment, strange peers
- 3-4 Years Separation from parents, supernatural beings such as monsters or ghosts, animals, the dark, noise
- 5 Years Animals, “bad” people, the dark, supernatural beings, injury, separation from parents

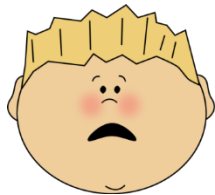


**Children may focus on fears to get a parent’s “attention.”** This is *never* conscious on the part of a child. It develops indirectly. A child may discover that when she talks about her fears (feeling scared, nobody liking her, having no friends, etc.), Mommy or Daddy become *highly* focused on her. The extra emotional attention feels good. What she quickly learns, then, is that becoming anxious is the most predictable way to guarantee that that her parents show concern for her. Parents, watch out! This can develop into a lifelong pattern.

**Children sense our fears and take them on as their own.** Parent’s over-anxious behavior can communicate “danger” to a child. Children read our emotions and model after us. This is fine when there is a reasonable danger. It is unhealthy when children absorb our unrealistic fears for them. It can keep children from trusting themselves or participating fully in a new situation. It also causes them to become over-focused on their anxious parent and to worry about them. Children also pick up the emotional intensity that we experience when we are under stress or in crisis. Some highly sensitive children may reverberate with their parent’s anxiety and in turn, develop fears of their own.

## What Can You Do to Help Your Child?

**Don’t try to talk your child out of his feelings.** Avoid the temptation to say something like “Come on, there’s nothing to be afraid of!” Remember, these fears are very real to your child.



Instead, use reflective listening to empathize with your child’s feelings: “You’re really afraid of that monster!” Don’t make your child do something that he is terrified of, such as pet a dog. Support him by saying “I know dogs are frightening to you. You can hold my hand and you don’t have to pet her.”

**Use play and fantasy to help your child overcome fears.** If your son is afraid of monsters in the closet, join with him in his magical thinking. Ask, “What can we do to get rid of the monsters?” Go into the closet and search for them. Maybe you’ll decide to catch them, put them in a garbage bag, and throw them in the trash. Maybe you’ll open the window and shoo them out with strong words: “Go away and don’t bother Michael tonight!” Trying to use logic and reason will not work! These fears are real to them.

**Make up “Magic” Tools.** Empower your child with magic safety “aids,” such as a protective flashlight by the bed, magic “Monster Spray” that “makes monsters disappear” (scented water in a spray bottle ), a stuffed animal who “watches for monsters while children sleep,” or a toy “Sword of Courage” that that hides under the pillow and banishes nightmares. Find a “Worry Basket” with a lid for worries before bedtime. Capture nightmares at night and put them in there too. Use anything to give a child a feeling of power.



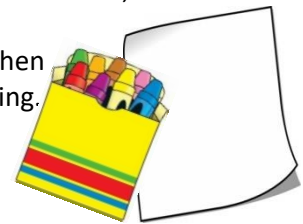
**Use favorite stuffed animals, “blankies,” and love notes as fear-soothers.** Stuffed toys and “loveys” act as “comforters” for children because they literally become substitutes for parents who are not there. Encourage your child to hold on to her favorite dolly when she feels scared and you’re not there. Put your “I love you” note in her pocket and tell her it will give her courage: *“Mommy’s love is inside there to help you be strong. Every time you touch it, you will feel the magic of Mommy’s love protecting you.”*

**Prepare a child ahead of time by “telling the story” through play.** Use rehearsal to tell a child about upcoming events that may arouse fears. Think of it as putting on a little play. Is Halloween coming? Is Mom going to the hospital to have a new baby? Are you moving to a new home? Use play figures or dolls to show exactly what will happen and who will take care of your child. Show what might be a little worrisome. Knowing just what to expect and seeing it acted out ahead of time gives a child a sense of control. First, you “tell the story.” Then ask your child to tell it and play it out. Practice builds even more confidence and mastery.

**Make up stories using super heroes who come to help.** Ask your child to imagine his or her favorite heroes coming to help deal with a fearful situation. Demonstrate how it’s done by making up a story. *“You are in the back yard and a big noise scares you. You call Dora the Explorer and she flies down to help you. She reminds you to cover your ears and say the magic words ‘Noises can’t hurt me, noises can’t hurt me.’ Dora says ‘Good job, Destiny. You are so brave!’ And then she flies away.”* Ask your child to make up the story after you. You are helping your child to practice coping while in the safe recesses of her mind.

**Read children’s books dealing with fearful events that children overcome.** Original fairy tales do this better than most other forms of children’s literature. Stories such as “Little Red Riding Hood” put children or young animals in dangerous circumstances but through their abilities, they come out of these adventures victorious. Children are comforted by knowing that other children have fears like they do and they can surmount them. Read stories about children who cope with nightmares, going to the doctor, etc.

**Draw the nightmare. Change the ending.** Have your child draw her nightmare when she tells you about it the next day. Then encourage her to think of a different ending. Through sharing, drawing, and making up stories, children are helped to release and take control of their fears.



**Teach self-talk.** Positive thoughts lead to bravery. Tell your child to make the little voice in his head say: *“I can do it. I’m getting braver!”* Or *“It’ll soon be over. Everything’s fine.”* Teach children that they can stop their scary thoughts by making the little voice in their head say “STOP” to their scary thoughts. Learning to talk differently to oneself is a powerful antidote to fear. The helpless, fearful feeling is replaced by the feeling of competency.

**Teach deep breathing.** Learning to breathe deeply and rhythmically can reduce children’s anxiety. Have your child put her hand on her chest and practice taking “big dinosaur breaths.” Count 1-2-3. The key is even, natural breathing with no pauses. Say, *“Can you feel your engine calming down? See how this works! You can do this whenever you get scared.”*

**Give your child many opportunities to be in control.** “*You choose...*” gives a child the chance to exert control and mastery. As the protective parent, you can also take charge and comfort a child by saying “*I’ll find the monsters. Tell me where to look. Tell me what to do with them when I find them.*” The child has some measure of control by directing you, but you are doing the protecting.

**Praise each step towards confidence and new behavior.** Notice your child being able to tolerate even a small amount of a fearful situation. Many children enjoy earning rewards by showing how brave they can be. This makes use of a child’s natural readiness to grow, change and become braver. With young children, a party can be held to celebrate the overcoming of a fear!

**Children with extreme fears may benefit from some counseling.** Feel free to contact me if you need consultation or support.



## Helpful Books for Children Facing Fears

### Nightmares and Night Time

- A Lion at Bedtime*** by Debi Gliori (fighting nightmares)
- Where the Wild Things Are*** by Maurice Sendak (an old favorite with illustrations that all children love)
- The Night The Scary Beasties Popped Out of My Head*** by D. And D. Kamish (fighting nightmares)
- Go Away Green Monster*** by Ed Emberley (an ingenious way to make scary monsters disappear)
- Scardy Squirrel at Night*** by Melanie Watt (squirrel is afraid to go to sleep at night)
- Oliver and the Monsters*** by Tony Blundell (Oliver keeps monsters out of his room, facing fears of the dark)

### Fears

- Wemberly Worried*** by Kevin Henkes (she worries about everything!)
- You’ve Got Dragons*** by Katheryn Cave and Nick Maland (little boy faces his fears called ‘dragons’)
- Edward and the Pirates*** by David McPhal (courage, overcoming obstacles, parent’s protection)
- Good Job, Little Bear*** by Martin Waddell (venturing out, parent protection)
- Let’s Go Home, Little Bear*** by Martin Waddell (Little Bear confronts fears in the woods, feels protected)
- You’re The Scardy Cat*** by Mercer Mayer (fear of the dark while sleeping outside)
- Stay Out of the Graveyard: Alone in the Dark*** by Kathleen Duey and Ron Berry
- Sheila Rae, The Brave*** by Kevin Henkes (Sheila Rae confronts her own fears)
- Don’t Be Afraid, Little Pip*** by Karma Wilson (fear of trying something new)
- Big Al and Shrimpy*** by Andrew Clements (little Shrimpy saves his friend even though he is afraid)
- Sometimes I’m Afraid*** by Jane Watson (coping with fears)
- Hazel’s Amazing Mother*** by Rosemary Wells (Hazel’s mother rescues her from bullies just in time)
- Vanessa Mouse*** by Marjorie Sharmat (shy mouse learns to make a friend)
- When I Feel Scared*** by Cornelia Maude Spelman (Great, simple books for preschoolers.)
- When My Worries Get Too Big: A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety*** by Kari Burton (good for preschoolers—simple tools for calming self)
- Is a Worry Worrying You?*** by F.Wolff & H. Savitz (deal w/ worries by creative, funny problem-solving)
- What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*** by D. Heubner & M Matthews (helpful for anxious children age 5+/uses cognitive behavioral techniques in an engaging way)

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