

Fears

All children have fears at some point in their life and it is usually considered to be a normal part of **development**. These fears are only abnormal if they are persistent or keep the child overly preoccupied with the subject that is feared, so that it interferes with normal activities, if the child can not be reassured or distracted away from the fear (becoming a phobia), or if it is an irrational fear. Whether or not a fear is **irrational** depends on a child's age and developmental level. For example, it is normal for a 2 year old to be afraid of sitting on the potty, but it would be irrational for an 8 year old to have the same fear.

Toddlers normally have simple fears of **separation, noises, falling, animals and insects**, using the **potty, bathing** and **bedtime**.

Fears among preschool age children include simple fears of **animals and insects, monsters and ghosts, getting lost, divorce, loss of a parent** and **bedtime**.

School age children normally have simple fears of **separation, noises, falling, new situations** (especially **starting school**) and **bedtime** in younger children, and **social rejection, war, new situations**, and **burglars** in older children.

Adolescents normally have simple fears of **burglars, new situations** (going to college, etc), **war, divorce**, and **sexual relations**.

In children of all ages, fears may also increase during times of stress (new baby, moving, divorce, etc). They may also develop a fear after a **triggering event**, such as falling in the water, touching something hot, or being chased by a dog.

Some children are more fearful of things, even common things, than others and this is usually a function of his type of **temperament**. Also, children who have parents that are very anxious or fearful, or who tend to overreact to things, often have children who have the same reactions in similar situations.

Some tips on dealing with your child's fears include:

- **Respect** your child's feelings and fears. It is not helpful to use put downs, such as 'your being a baby for being afraid of that,' or to try and ignore the things that he is afraid of.
- Ask him why he is afraid and then **talk** about it. This can be especially helpful if there was a triggering event.
- **Don't be overprotective** and let him avoid all of the things that he is afraid of, but you also don't want to try and force your child into doing something he is afraid to do.
- **Don't overreact**, so that your extra attention reinforces your child's reactions.
- Give your child **support** as he learns to master his fears. For example, if your child is afraid of starting a new school, you should be empathetic by saying things like 'I know you are scared of starting a new school and you are probably worried about making new friends, but I think you will feel much better once you get started' and talk to him about the things that he is afraid of. Remind him that he has always made friends before and provide encouragement once he starts school. It may also be helpful to model or role play how to go up to and introduce himself to new people.
- Remind him of other things or times in the past that he was afraid of, and for which he is no longer has fears.
- Again, **reassure** and **comfort** your child as you help him to face his fears. In the long run, it is also not helpful to teach your child that it is alright to avoid everything that he is afraid of.

If a fear seems like it is turning into a **phobia**, with your child not responding to repeated reassurances or not being able to be distracted away from the fear, especially if the fears are interrupting his development or daily activities, then you should seek professional treatments from a child psychologist.