

## Normal Childhood Fears

### Is it Normal for Kids to Have Fears?

It's normal for children to feel afraid at times. Fear is an emotion that can help kids be cautious. Things that are new, big, loud, or different can seem scary at first. Parents can help kids feel safe and learn to feel at ease.

### What Do Kids Feel Afraid of?

What kids feel afraid of changes as they grow. Some fears are common and normal at certain ages.

For example:

**Infants feel stranger anxiety.** When babies are about 8–9 months old, they can recognize the faces of people they know. That's why new faces can seem scary to them — even a new babysitter or relative. They may cry or cling to a parent to feel safe.

**Toddlers feel separation anxiety.** At some time between 10 months and 2 years, many toddlers start to fear being apart from a parent. They don't want a parent to leave them at daycare, or at bedtime. They may cry, cling, and try to stay near their parent.

**Young kids fear "pretend" things.** Kids ages 4 through 6 can imagine and pretend. But they can't always tell what's real and what's not. To them, the scary monsters they imagine seem real. They fear what might be under their bed or in the closet. Many are afraid of the dark and at bedtime. Some are afraid of scary dreams. Young kids may also be afraid of loud noises, like thunder or fireworks.

**Older kids fear real-life dangers.** When kids are 7 or older, monsters under the bed can't scare them (much) because they know they're not real. At this age, some kids begin to fear things that could happen in real life. They may have a fear that a "bad guy" is in the house. They may feel afraid about natural disasters they hear about. They may fear getting hurt or that a loved one could die. Schoolage kids may also feel anxious about schoolwork, grades, or fitting in with friends.

**Preteens and teens may have social fears.** They might feel anxious about how they look or whether they will fit in. They may feel anxious or afraid before they give a report in class, start a new school, take a big exam, or play in a big game.

### How Can I Help When My Child Is Afraid?

When your child is afraid, you can help by doing these things:

- Comfort your infant, toddler, or very young child by saying, "It's OK, you're safe, I'm here." Let your child know you're there to protect them. Give hugs and soothing words to help your child feel safe.
- As your child grows, talk and listen. Be calm and soothing. Help your child put feelings into words. Help kids try new things.
- Help your baby get used to a new person while you hold him and let him feel safe. Soon, the new person won't seem like a stranger anymore.
- Let your toddler be apart from you for short times at first. When you need to part from your child, say you'll be back, give a hug and a smile, and go. Let your child learn that you always come back.
- For your young child who's afraid of the dark, have a soothing bedtime routine. Read or sing to your child. Let your child feel safe and loved.
- Help your child slowly face fears. For example, check together for under-bed monsters. With you there to support her, let your child see for herself there's nothing to fear. Help her feel her courage.

- Limit the scary images, movies, or shows kids see. These can cause fears.
- Help kids and teens learn to prepare for challenges, like tests or class reports. Let them know you believe in them.

## **Is My Child's Fear Normal, or Do We Need More Help?**

Most kids cope with normal fears with gentle support from their parent. As they grow, they get over fears they had at a younger age.

Some kids have a harder time, and need more help with fears. If fears are extreme or keep a child from doing normal things, it might be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

Talk to your doctor if your child's fears:

- seem extreme or last past the normal age
- cause your child to be very upset or have tantrums
- keep your child from doing things — like going to school, sleeping alone, or being apart from you
- cause physical symptoms (like stomachaches, headaches, or a racing heart) or your child feels breathless, dizzy, or sick

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