

## Parents Ask Us About...

# FEARS

Fears are a normal and, to a certain degree, healthy part of children's development. Some fears may develop when children become aware of the cause-and-effect relationships or of the many ways in which they can be hurt. These fears are healthy because they can protect young children. Other fears may stem from emotional development as children experience inner conflict over wanting to be independent yet still needing adult protection. Fears can also stem from not being able to control their own aggression. Many fears develop because young children have such active imaginations.

Studies at the Gessell Institute of Human Development document "typical fears" for different stages of development. For example, 2-year-olds tend to fear loud noises, while 2 1/2-year-olds are likely to have spatial fears or fears of moving objects. Threes seem to have more visual fears of things like masks and the dark. Auditory fears are strong again for fours, while fives are beginning to have concrete fears like bodily harm or falling. Children of all ages fear being abandoned by their parents.

Often, a natural reaction of parents is to try to get the child to deny the fear ("That's silly. You know there's no monster in the closet.") or to force the child to face the fear before the child is ready (Throw the child in the pool to get over the fear of water.) Child development experts agree that neither of these approaches is effective. Here are some "do's" and "don'ts" suggested by the Gessell Institute.

When your child is afraid avoid:

- making fun of the fear.
- shaming your child in front of others.
- forcing your child to "face" the fear before ready.
- becoming impatient and treating your child as if he or she were babyish.
- assuming that the fear is necessarily your fault or your child's fault.
- the feeling that your child's fears are bad or unnatural.

When your child is afraid:

- Respect your child's fear.
- Realize that most fears are outgrown
- Allow a reasonable period of withdrawal from fears before attempting to confront.
- Give your child an opportunity to become gradually used to feared thing a little at a time.

### School for Little Children

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- When and if he come to a period of compulsively over-approaching a formerly feared object or situation (a child's natural method of tackling his fears) help him have the experience he desire under your supervision.
- Try, within reason, to spare your child a situation which you know will cause fear.
- Familiarize yourself with the kinds of fears which children naturally experience at different ages.
- If your child's fear is excessive and troublesome and you cannot find the cause, and if time does not take care of it, you may wish to seek specialized help to solve the problem.\*

Many experts suggest reading books or stories to your child which have characters with similar fears and strategies for coping with those fears. This may help children realize that fears are normal and can be overcome.

\*from Child Behavior by Ilg, Ames & Baker, p.165.

The following books contain sections dealing with fears and young children.

Brazelton, T. Berry, Touchpoints. Addison-Wesley, 1992. (Chapter 22).

Galinsky, Ellen and Judy David, The Preschool Years. Times Books, 1998.

Ilg, Frances L., Louis Bates and Sidney M. Baker, Child Behavior, Harper & Row, New York, 1981.

Parents Magazine's The Best Advice I Ever Got. Rodale, 2001