



First Steps

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Understanding the Fear Factor

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

It is normal for all children to develop fears at some point in their life. Generally, children outgrow their fears or are able to understand and manage their fears with the help of caring adults. If fears get in the way of normal activities, if the child cannot be calmed or distracted away from the fear, or if it is an unreasonable fear, then professional help may be needed. “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.”

Source: A Pediatrician’s Guide to Your Children’s Health and Safety

Most Common Early Childhood Fears

6 months: fear of strangers

8 months: separation from parent and falling

1 year: separation from parent, noises, animals, bath, doctor

2 years: separation from parent, toilet training, bath, bedtime, doctor

3 years: loss of parent, toilet training, bedtime, monsters and ghosts, people who look different than family (beard, disability, skin color, etc.)

4 years: noises, animals, bedtime, monsters and ghosts, people who look different than family, loss of parent, death, divorce

5 years: noises, animals, monsters and ghosts, getting lost, going to daycare, loss of parent, death, injury, divorce



Source: Schachter & McCauley, When Your Child is Afraid

Tips for Parents to Help Children Handle Their Fears



Respect your child's fears and feelings. The fears may not make sense to an adult, but for the child, they are real.

Offer an understanding of the fear and give a helpful explanation. For example, "Loud noises like thunder can be scary, but they will not harm us."

Control what your child sees on TV. Many programs are too scary for young children and may only increase their fears. Young children up to age 7 should not watch violence on TV. If they see news or shows that may be upsetting, be sure to talk about what they have seen to help calm their fears. Clear up any confusion by answering questions.

Tell your child that you will help keep him safe while he learns to overcome his fears.

Make your home a safe place where your child feels secure and comfortable. Keep your child close to you without being overprotective.

Read age-appropriate books about fears (*There's a Nightmare in My Closet* and *Where the Wild Things Are*, for example) and talk about your child's fears with him or her.

Reassure your child that you are doing everything necessary to make her surroundings safe and that you care about her feelings. Also, tell her that good, honest, responsible people are working to make the world a safer place for everyone.

Helping Children Deal with Fears. . .

Children learn about the world through many sources: parents, teachers, friends, radio, and television. News gained from television and radio or the Internet can be a positive experience for kids, but problems can begin when the pictures shown are violent or when news stories are about upsetting topics. Reports about kidnappings, murders, terrorist activities, school violence, and war can teach children to see the world as a confusing, threatening, and unfriendly place. Parents need to keep an eye on the information their children receive about these topics. They need to visit with their children about the issues to clear up confusion and to reassure children that they are safe. Parents must be available to their children and spend extra time with them when they are frightened. Children must be certain that the adults in their lives will take care of them and keep them safe.



For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.