

Fighting Fears

growing self esteem

by Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

Dealing with fear is a common issue for everyone. As children go through different periods in their cognitive, emotional, and social development, they may experience new or different anxieties and fears. For children ages 8-10, a common fear is going to different parts of the house by themselves at night. This seems to have become particularly prevalent in some of the children I see, especially as we move toward winter and days become shorter.

The sudden anxiety and need to have someone accompany your child as she moves around the house can cause stress in the family—especially if you've spent a long day at work or are in the middle of cooking dinner or helping a sibling with homework.

It is important to keep in mind that fears are a natural part of your child's development. It is a way of practicing to be an adult. Your job as a parent is to provide an understanding ear as you help your child figure out how to deal with her fears while conveying your confidence in her ability to be successful. You can help your child learn and practice coping skills, lessons that lasts a lifetime.

Telling your child not to be afraid or giving a logical explanation why she is wrong to be afraid could make the feeling worse. Not only will she still be afraid, but now she is disappointing you, too. She may become even more upset, trying to convince you that there really is something to be afraid of. There is no benefit to reasoning with a distraught child. When emotion takes over, logic goes out the door. Do whatever you need to do to calm your child—even if it means walking with her down the long, dark hall.

We want to teach our children that they can manage their anxiety by moving through it, by learning ways to stay calm and dealing with their fear. The best time to start a conversation with your child about her fears is when she is calm. Convey to her that you understand her fear. You can share stories from your life about when you have been afraid and have overcome it. Explain that it is natural to experience anxiety. Convey your faith in her: that you know in the future, maybe not now, but soon, she will get past this fear. Tell her that anxiety comes and goes, and it is

not something that will harm her. Let your child know how much stronger she will be when she learns to manage her anxiety.

Here are a few ideas that can help your child through her fears:

- Take her anxiety seriously and help your child think through her fear. You might ask your child to draw what it is that she is afraid of because seeing it on paper can make it easier to talk about.
- Ask your child to answer these questions: "What am I worried about? Why does it worry me? What if it happens? What will I do if it does happen?" This will help your child realize that what she is afraid of is more a product of her mind and, in reality, not likely to be really true. Nothing has happened to her in the past when she has gone to this part of the house, and the likelihood of something happening to her now is quite low. And if something were to happen, you can help her make a plan to handle it.
- Teach your child some self-calming techniques for when she does face anxiety-provoking situations and practice them together. For example, she can take five deep breaths, sing a happy song, focus on what she needs to do, or repeat to herself that she knows she is OK. Let her know that even while doing these things, she may be anxious again in the future. But the next time she has this or any other fear, she has tools to help her get through it.

With practice using these kinds of techniques, your child will find that dealing with her fears becomes easier and easier. She will be more apt to do the things she wants to do and her self confidence and self esteem will become stronger. ●

Dr. Jeffrey Katz is a clinical psychologist, in practice in Virginia Beach. Dr. Katz works with children, adolescents, adults, and their families. He specializes in the evaluation and treatment of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and learning and behavioral problems. He is on the national board of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD) and is the co-chair of the national public policy committee.



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