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PARENTING WITH CONFIDENCE



fear of the dark

Many children feel afraid of the dark. A child's fear may disrupt their bedtime routine and sleep. There are many ways that parents can help their child to overcome this common fear. A nightlight, comforters such as a toy or teddy and a bedtime routine can help. A toddler or preschooler tends to be afraid of unfamiliar things that they don't understand or can't control.

Their active imaginations, and their inability to always distinguish between reality and fantasy, means they may believe that monsters are under the bed or in the wardrobe waiting to spring once the light goes out. Take a child's fears seriously but do not pretend to check for monsters as this may suggest to the child you believe monsters could exist. A child's anxiety may stem from events such as a parental separation, injury or hospital stay.

If not addressed, a child's fear may linger and continue to disrupt their bedtime routine and sleeping habits. There are many ways that parents can help their child to overcome a fear of the dark.

The fearful child - Some children are more fearful than others. Some of the contributing factors may include:

Genetic susceptibility – some children are generally more sensitive and emotional in their temperament.

At least one anxious parent – children learn how to behave from watching their parents.

Overprotective parenting – a dependent child is more likely to feel helpless and this can lead to generalised anxiety.

Stressful events – such as parental separation, an injury or hospital stay.

Be sensitive

It is important to handle a child's fear of the dark with sympathy and understanding. If you aren't afraid of the dark, you may find yourself ridiculing or dismissing your child's feelings, or even becoming frustrated and angry. This approach may increase their anxiety levels. The first step to help your child to overcome their irrational fear is to accept their feelings as real and respond to them sensitively.

Talk to your child - Suggestions include:

- Ask them to tell you about their fears and what exactly makes them afraid.
- Show your child that you understand their fears
- Reassure them that they are safe
- If your child is afraid of the dark because of the possibility of intruders, it may help to show them the security measures around the house, such as locks. However never lock a deadlock while people are inside the house, as it may block escape in a fire or other emergency.
- Ask your child for suggestions on what would make them feel more secure. Offer suggestions yourself. Perhaps they would feel better if they took special toys or comforters to bed.

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Other fears

Find out if their fear comes from other worries. For example, some children may be afraid of their parents separating or dying, and this heightened anxiety is worsened when they are alone in the dark. Talk to your child honestly about such issues.

General suggestions - Practical ways to deal with your child's fear of the dark include:

- Establish a bedtime routine that your child finds relaxing and enjoyable. Predictable bedtime routines help to reduce anxiety.
- Install a nightlight in your child's room, or let some light from the hallway or other nearby source filter into their room.
- A child's fear tends to lessen if they feel they have some control over a situation. For example, consider putting a lamp by their bedside so they can switch on the light themselves. Use a low wattage bulb.
- Make sure their television viewing habits and reading materials are appropriate to their age. A child can easily be frightened by news footage, movies, scary books and cartoons.
- Look around their room at night and try to see things from their perspective. Is there a picture or toy that may cast a shadow or look creepy in the half-light?
- Regular exercise helps to reduce stress levels. Make sure your child has plenty of physical activity during the day.
- Don't make a big deal or fuss about your child's fear in front of them or other people, in case they feel more anxious about it.
- Don't make fun of or belittle their fear.
- There are a range of books on managing childhood fears, both for the parents and the child.

Reinforce positive behavior

Allow your child to make small steps towards overcoming their fear and compliment them on each achievement. Whenever they accomplish a step, such as not jumping out of bed the minute you tuck them in, praise them. Toddlers respond well to simple reward systems, such as stickers or stamps on a wall chart.

If your child's fear of the dark continues or worsens, or if other things or events start to trigger bouts of anxiety, you may like to seek professional help. Children can be taught how to manage their own anxiety, and parents can learn helping strategies.

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