When Young Children Are Afraid

by Sandra Crosser

With panic clearly showing in his eyes, Josh dropped to the floor, locked his dad’s leg between both arms, and screamed. It was Josh’s first day at school. While young children’s fears may not always appear to be rational in the eyes of adults, every child’s fearful response deserves to be acknowledged as a genuine reaction to an actual or perceived threat. Because fear has the potential to interfere with the young child’s quality of life, it would seem important to understand the nature and normal developmental course of early childhood fears.

Why Do Children Become Fearful?

There are several plausible explanations for why children may exhibit fearful behavior. Perhaps there is an inborn fear mechanism. Even in newborn babies, a loud noise or sudden lack of support will trigger the startle reflex, during which the infant extends its limbs and shudders violently. Age seems to correlate with other fears as well. For example, at about eight months most infants develop at least a slight degree of stranger anxiety. On the other hand, some fears appear to be learned either from personal experience or from behavior modeled by others. Then again, there are times when fears seem to appear without reason and to disappear just as mysteriously.

We do know that, in general, people tend to have the most fears when they feel least powerful and most vulnerable—during early childhood and in old age. As children mature and develop a greater sense of control over their environment, their fears tend to decrease.
The nature of specific fears seems to change with age as well. Preschool children tend to exhibit fears of large objects and animals, separation from the parent, and supernatural creatures, as well as bedtime fears related to darkness and being alone. It has been suggested that these are generalized fears which the child does not yet have the ability to classify realistically. Consequently, a child assigns them a mysterious category all their own. However, children a few years older are able to think in more concrete terms, so they center on more realistic fears which they can name, such as earthquakes and physical injury. As children move into adolescence, they become most anxious about committing social and sexual blunders which would embarrass them in front of their peers.

This change in types of fears with age may be due to corresponding age-related changes in cognitive development. Fears tend to become more realistic and concrete as children gain the ability to differentiate between reality and fantasy and to understand cause-and-effect relationships.

In addition, preschool children may be more susceptible to fears because they tend to think irreversibly. That is, once someone or something has changed form, it cannot revert back to what it was previously. For example, the young child may believe that when Kevin puts on a gorilla mask, Kevin actually becomes a gorilla. The child may not be able to conceptualize that the gorilla could possibly reverse back into being Kevin again. In the same way of thinking, when Mom leaves David alone at preschool, he may not be able to think of the reverse action—that Mom will return for him. It is the nature of the preschool child's thought that makes the world a fearful place at times.

The very young child's egocentric thought further complicates the ability to manage fears. Because children are usually unable to step mentally into another person's shoes, they are able to view any particular object or situation from only one perspective—their own. In addition, preschoolers' thought is frequently not yet logical. Instead, they think translogically, positively that their faulty reasoning is correct, no matter how much rational explanation is offered.

Aren't Some Children Just Naturally More Fearful Than Others?

Research into temperament types indicates that some children do tend to approach the world more cautiously than others. Three basic temperament types have been identified: easy, difficult, and slow-to-warm-up. The slow-to-warm-up child is likely to be guarded and wary in an approach to new experience and novel situations. Therefore, she or he may anticipate preschool with trepidation, spending the first days gingerly sizing up the other children, teachers, and activities.

While there is evidence supporting a biological predisposition toward one temperament type or another, the role of environment as a modifier cannot be ignored. Of course, children learn fear from their own experiences and from the experiences of others. But children also learn fears that are modeled by others. For example, the parent who demonstrates anxiety over a visit to the dentist may find the same fear developing in his or her children. Likewise, the caregiver who exhibits alarm when a spider or bee invades the classroom is, in effect, teaching the children to fear. It would therefore seem important for parents and teachers to avoid negative modeling and, instead, to model for children more positive coping strategies. In some instances, children have been able to overcome fears by simply watching how others deal positively with the fear-inducing object or event.

The general psychological parenting environment in which the child is reared may interact with the child's temperamental predisposition to create a more or less fearful approach to life's experiences. For example, between the ages of one and three, the child is developing a sense of self as a separate, autonomous individual capable of manipulating the environment and managing some degree of control over her or his life. The parent or caregiver who encourages independence within a warm and consistently firm psychological environment enables children to build a picture of themselves as capable and competent individuals. Children who are encouraged to explore the world within safe parameters, who are given choices about life's events, and who are accorded dignity and respect are children who will develop a strong sense of independence and autonomy. Those characteristics allow the child to approach the world in a proactive mode, where life is filled with excitement and enticing puzzles to be solved, rather than fears and phantoms to be avoided. Conversely, children who live a life rigidly controlled by an adult learn to be helpless, may be ashamed of their personal abilities, and may come to doubt themselves.

As the toddler enters the early childhood years, it becomes particularly important to develop a sense of purpose, or initiative. Healthy initiative in a preschool child means the freedom to develop a plan for play and carrying out that plan independently. The child who has not developed a sense of initiative flits from one activity to the next without focus or organization. Parents and teachers can help the three- to five-year-old child develop this sense of initiative by encouraging the child's planning and providing the developmentally appropriate materials to carry out those plans successfully, listening attentively to problems, and recognizing the child's efforts.

What does this emerging sense of initiative have to do with fears? Overprotective and overcautious adults can instill in the child a sense of fear—fear of trying the new and different because of admonitions like "You might ruin your shirt," "Scissors will cut you," "You're too little," or "You might get hurt."

Adults who rely on guilt as a discipline tactic may also interfere with this developing sense of initiative. If children are faced consistently with guilt when their plans go awry, they may come to fear that anything they do will be "wrong" and may become reliant on adults, rather than on themselves, becoming crippled by fear when approaching new adventures and activities.

As children develop a sense of au-