

# CHILDHOOD FEARS

## A. Infants

1. **STRANGER ANXIETY.** This may begin around five months of age. Infants at this age are not only capable of recognizing their parents, but are also capable of recognizing strangers. They may even cry when grandparents hold them. Recommendation: Let your infant get to know the new person gradually on his own terms. Strangers should approach slowly and should not hover over the infant. It is sometimes helpful to avoid eye contact with the baby initially, so the baby can observe a new person safely from a distance.

2. **SEPARATION ANXIETY.** This can occur as early as five months but typically appears at seven to nine months. The infant will protest separation from parents. This anxiety may take many forms, such as resisting nap time or crying and clinging when the parent leaves the room. Even when the child gets older and learns to play by himself, he will periodically check in to see if his parent is still there. This is not the best time to leave home for extended vacations. Recommendation: It is OK to leave the child for short periods of time, because it is only by actually experiencing your absence and subsequent return that the child will learn to trust that you will return. When you leave your baby at the sitter's or leave home for a night out, be sure to say goodbye, even though this may cause a peacefully playing child to cry and make you feel guilty. It is better to achieve this level of honesty, so the child will have confidence that in the future you will not sneak out on him.

## B. Toddlers 18 to 36 Months

1. **FEAR OF THE DARK.** This usually occurs when children have achieved the ability to imagine monsters lurking in corners. Recommendation: Use a night light and keep a familiar teddy bear or blanket in bed with the child. Some parents find it helpful to stay with the child in his room until he falls back to sleep. Some children insist on sleeping in their parents' bed, which is effective in getting everyone back to sleep quickly but avoids the issue. Unless you teach your children that their rooms are safe, you may actually reinforce the problem.

## C. Preschoolers 3 to 5 Years

1. **NIGHT FEARS AND NIGHTMARES.** Recommendation: Parents may stay with the child and comfort him until he goes back to sleep. Sometimes telling a wonderful fantasy story about toys and gumballs and ice cream will calm him down. Providing the child with a flashlight to keep under the pillow to be used to check out scary dark corners may make the child feel less vulnerable. Some parents have had their older children draw a picture of the nightmare the next morning. Then, by ripping up and throwing the picture out, the child may gain some feeling of control over his nightmares.

2. **FEAR OF DEATH.** Some children express a fear of death and worry that they will stop breathing when they go to sleep. This may occur especially if the parents have discussed the death of a relative using terms like "going to sleep" instead of dying. Recommendation: Parents should communicate openly and honestly with their children about death. It is better to use words like "dead" and "dying" instead of "sleep" or "went on a long trip," which may be misinterpreted. Even saying "God came down to take Grandma to heaven" may not be soothing, and the child may be secretly frightened that any night now God will come down for him.

Listen very carefully to your child's fears. If he or she senses you are not listening or do not take them seriously, it may compound the problem.

"You sound very worried that there is a monster in the closet. I know it can be very scary and I remember when I was your age I was scared, too." (I understand your fears.) "But there are no monsters here. It is just your imagination; it is just pretend." (Help the child to separate what he imagines from what is real.) "Mommy and Daddy are here and this is a safe place." (Reassure him about his safety.) "How about if I stay here and keep you company, because I want to tell you about this little boy who loved to eat ice cream..." (Guide his imagination to more pleasant areas.)

Remember that all techniques are not effective for all kids, and some that work one day may not be as effective the next. Fears are not reasonable or logical and, therefore, cannot be argued away with reason or ridicule. It is a time when your child needs to feel loved and protected and understood.