

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Helping Children Cope with Their Fears

“Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.”
~ Michael Pritchard

FEARS OFTEN POP at this time of year like weeds in a beautiful spring garden, because the end of the year signals change. Children, proud of going to kindergarten, camp, or middle school, confide things like, “I’m worried that I won’t have any friends.” Of course, children of every age experience fears, and changing to a new environment is only one of the common threads.

However, their anxiety naturally provokes reactions in us. We want their fears to melt under the laser light of our rational explanations. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. You always make new friends.” However, scientific research and reflection on our own experiences informs us that fearful reactions don’t dissolve instantly.

Psychologists have developed a multitude of proven techniques that help children manage anxieties and feel empowered in stressful situations. We start by accepting children’s struggles with fear as important to their growth. Whether a child feels nervous around dogs or fears that a tornado will demolish her house, the goal is to strengthen her abilities to gradually let go of those fearful sensations. For example, going to visit a new school, meeting the teacher, and asking questions strengthen children’s abilities to handle transitions.

Empower your child with others. Be cautious not to intervene in ways that make a fearful child feel helpless. If a child has a conflict with another child, he may feel residual anxiety about being around that child. Avoid reinforcing your child’s fear or unwittingly encouraging her to think of herself as helpless by saying she has to stay away from that child. Teach your child that it’s natural to feel uncomfortable, but she can give strong “I messages” like “I don’t like to be teased.”

Talk about thoughts. We help children with fears by teaching them that their imaginations can trick them into feeling scared. Just because we have a thought about lightning striking us or being attacked by an animal doesn’t mean we’re in danger. In *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety*, Dr. Tamar Chamsky suggests labeling one part of the brain the “Worry Brain” and another the “Smart Brain” so that children can learn to identify sensations of fear as coming from their own thoughts. “My Smart Brain is telling me that being nervous doesn’t mean that I’ll strike out at bat.”

Most importantly, we want to encourage children to talk about their fears, because anxieties kept secret get bigger, like imagined monsters in the closet. Expressing scared feelings can make children feel silly and helpless. However, if we accept fear as a part of life, anxious feelings don’t have to involve shame. Talk about the fears you felt as a child and the way you cope with anxieties now, with self-compassion and understanding.

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