



by Karen Stephens

When Kids' Fears Need More Than a Parent's Help

Fear, and learning to manage it, is a normal part of growing up. But the cause of a fear is often difficult for parents to determine. Sorting out children's real versus imagined fears is taxing. Some fears are rational and make sense; others are out of this world. And with today's sensational headlines, parents are likely to jump to premature and unlikely conclusions about causes.

For instance, a child fearing a man with a beard doesn't necessarily indicate they've been abused by the man or any man. Usually, children are just responding to the difference in appearance and the more aggressive look of a beard. With time, almost all children realize a beard is just a personal adornment, like an individual's hairstyle.

Other fears crop up due to family problems. Take children living with parents who fight frequently. In an attempt to distract parents from arguing, children sometimes develop fears. It's their attempt to bring the parents *together* on their behalf. The child tries to make the parents focus on their parenting role, rather than their conflict-laden spousal roles. If such distraction succeeds in promoting more civility and harmony in the home, a child's fearfulness may be reinforced, though unintentionally.

Barring family troubles, there's always the nagging thought that kids may express fears with self-serving, ulterior motives in mind. Children may feign fear to manipulate gullible parents. Using fears as stall tactics at bedtime is a notorious tactic. You know the scenario, "Daddy, I'm scared. Can I watch television with you?" "Mommy, I hear a strange noise. Will you sleep with me?" Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a real fear and a smart kid who's just pulling your leg. You feel heartless if the fear is real and like a stooge if it's not.

For the most part, I give kids the benefit of the doubt. When fears first surface, my first response is to put into practice ideas listed in the other Parenting Exchange columns on children's fears. You listen to fears, accept them as genuine, offer reassurance that you'll always keep your child safe, and so on.

However, sometimes that's not enough to help kids conquer fear. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, children's fears grow into full-blown phobias. Phobias are severe, persistent, exaggerated and/or illogical fears that interfere with a child's life, happiness, and development. They hold kids back from experiences and stifle their sense of adventure. They can delay children's growth in all areas, and I don't mean just emotional development. Progress in social skills with peers can be blocked and intellectual advances obstructed, too.

Phobias generally require help beyond what parents can give. Sure, from time to time you hear of a child overcoming a phobia with no intervention, but it's not often. Significant childhood phobias usually require professional counseling. Parents can't diagnose a phobia; diagnosis requires training, and we're too subjective anyway. But we can detect clues that indicate that a fear and its intensity are unusual, or beyond what a child can master alone. A certified child psychologist or child psychiatrist can diagnose a phobia and suggest treatment.

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If your child's behavior suggests a phobia, mental health services should be obtained. If a phobia is confirmed, length of treatment will vary. Sliding-scale fee arrangements are available in most communities, so lower income families can afford to get their children help. Some insurance companies cover dependents' mental health bills.

Counseling options are listed in the yellow pages or can be provided by an informed school counselor, physician, or minister/rabbi/priest. Your county's telephone hotline can also be called for referrals. Word of mouth referrals can direct you to good counselors. Ask trusted friends for leads and their confidentiality.

Following is a list of behaviors or conditions that MIGHT indicate a fear has grown into a phobia. If several or more of these describe your child, please don't hesitate, or be too embarrassed, to seek an opinion from a qualified and experienced professional. Chances are you'll get good news. And if your child needs help, you'll get informed guidance on how to proceed. At the very least, you'll have taken the first step toward your child's healing process, and that is often the biggest step of all.

It's a wise parent who knows when to accept a helping hand. Getting kids the skilled assistance they need early, rather than later, can make a world of difference for them and for your entire family.

Fears That Call for Special Help

- Child's fear is very intense, leading to prolonged periods of anguish characterized by hysterical crying, screaming and/or physical tantrums.
- The fear is persistent and lasts longer than several months.
- Despite your best efforts to help and reassure your child, the fear becomes progressively worse rather than gradually diminishing.
- Fear disrupts your child's daily life that previously went smoothly, such as problems with friendships.
- Fear interrupts with your child's ability to do school work or function at child care.
- Participation in previously enjoyed activities, such as sports or hobbies, has sharply subsided.
- There are unexplained and definite changes in daily rhythms, such as sleep pattern, appetite level, or energy for activity.
- Episodes of panic come on abruptly and your child can't identify the cause of fear.
- Child's fear impairs their concentration level during any kind of activity, even games.
- Child regresses to very early behaviors, such as thumb sucking, whining, body rocking, hair sucking, or baby talk.
- Child completely withdraws into silence.
- Child excessively seeks out hiding places and stays there for long periods of time.
- Fear causes child to harm herself, such as with sticks, stones, needles, or knives.
- Your child has extremely low frustration tolerance, such as banging head on a wall whenever a mistake is made, even a very minor one.
- Nervous ticks and behaviors crop up, such as twitches or pulling eyebrows and lashes out.
- You notice unvarying avoidance of a particular place, such as school or child care.
- There is unvarying avoidance of a particular object, such as spiders, dogs, or clowns.
- Child shows signs of being obsessive or compulsive. For instance, your child uses repeated rituals to ward off fears. If rituals are prevented, your child falls completely apart by losing control of emotions, behavior and language.
- Psychosomatic complaints are very frequent, such as developing stomach or headaches to avoid child care or school.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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