



# Fear Not

## Steps to identify and help kids cope with fear

→ Life as a child can be scary. Due to children's level of cognitive development, they have much more difficulty understanding the difference between real and make believe than adults. In some ways, this makes life more fun; everyday objects can become parts of a fantastic make believe game, corners of the house become castles, Santa Claus exists as an important

figure during the holidays. But it can also mean the opposite, that children have much more difficulty measuring the reality of perceived threats; for example, the shadow under the bed becomes an intruder, monsters in a movie may become horrors in real life and taunts from another child on the playground may be viewed as incredibly threatening.

Dr. Raazhan Rae-Seebach, a clinical

psychologist working with Olivia's Place, explains, "Fear is a basic human emotion programmed into the nervous system. From infancy, we are equipped to respond with fear when we sense danger or feel unsafe. Fear can help protect us by alerting us to danger and preparing us to deal with it. It is natural and can be helpful in some situations serving as a warning, a signal to be cautious or



careful. The intensity of fear can vary from mild to medium to intense, and can be very brief or long-lasting. Fear can be healthy if it cautions us to stay safe, but is unnecessary when it creates more caution than is needed."

### Identifying Your Child's Fear

Dr. Rae-Seebach encourages parents to try to learn a bit more about their child's fear before trying to help him or her overcome it. Noticing the answers to a few of the questions she poses can help parents have insight into how to resolve it. "What are the symptoms of the fear, and how do they affect your child's personal, social and academic functioning? If you can identify the symptoms in the context of your child's everyday activities, adjustments can be made to reduce some of the stressors." She goes on to state, however, that special arrangements should not be made for a child to avoid a feared situation itself, as this may only serve to fuel the ongoing fear.

"Secondly," Dr. Rae-Seebach asks, "does the fear seem unreasonable in relation to the reality of the situation? Could it be a sign of a more serious problem? If the fear seems out of proportion to the cause of the stress, this could signal the need to seek professional help."

### Parental Patience

On trying to help children be less afraid, Carrie Jones, director of counseling at the Community Center Shanghai says, "It may sound basic or obvious, but first and perhaps most importantly, don't mock or belittle children's fears. Believe it or not, many parents do! It is not helpful and actually can be damaging to tell a child they are acting like a baby or that big boys / girls aren't afraid of such things. Also, regardless of what the fear or phobia is, don't send children the message that it is shameful or embarrassing to have it."

Certainly we can all remember times when we have felt afraid of things that weren't necessarily a threat to our wellbeing. For example, we may have feared that making a mistake at work would cause us to lose our jobs.

Clearly, when we're able to think about it rationally, we can see that in the majority of cases, this wouldn't happen. However, when we're caught up in the moment of stress and anxiety, this may not be so clear.

And again, as mentioned before, children have less of an ability to "rationalize" these things than do adults because their prefrontal cortexes are less developed.

As such, Jones encourages parents to "Respond to the fear with empathy. Try to listen and understand what it is rooted in or the anxiety behind it. This will help you know how to address it and help your child overcome it."

### A Gradual Change

Children can approach overcoming their fears gradually. Begin with something small and related to the fear to help give children a sense of mastery over it. Jones gives the example, "for a child who is afraid of dogs, you might first stand by him while he looks at a dog behind a fence from a good distance away from the fence. Then, gradually get closer and closer to the fence. Later you might pet the dog through the fence. Then, you might enter the fence, but with the dog on a leash. This would all be step by step, over time, and with the parent or another trusted figure accompanying the child."

Dr. Rae-Seebach suggests a few additional coping strategies, such as helping the child learn to identify what the fear feels like in his or her body, and then teaching him or her to self-soothe through relaxation, pleasurable experiences and positive self-talk and reinforcement.

Many of us can remember having imaginary friends or companions that helped us out as children. Jones recommends harnessing some of this imaginative power to help children feel less afraid. "Sometimes it helps to use fantasy to address fears and phobias. You can help the child imagine that they have a superpower to help them conquer the fear or you could make up a story about

a child in a similar situation overcoming the fear—be sure to include the child in the process!"

She adds that when children begin to put the effort into facing their fears, it is important to praise the child for the courage this took, even if he / she hasn't quite over-

come it. This helps give the child more encouragement to keep trying.

As with any difficulty your child may have, if the problem seems to really be pervasive in the sense that it is affecting your child's functioning at school and / or home, it is wise to seek professional support from a counselor, social worker or psychologist. A complete listing of professionals providing these services in Shanghai can be found at [www.s-imha.org](http://www.s-imha.org).



**Christine Forte**  
is a counselor  
with Balanced  
Heart Counseling



**Regardless of what the fear or phobia is, don't send the children the message that it is shameful or embarrassing to have it**