



The 3, 4 and 5-Year-Old Child: Common Fears

The preschool years are exciting times for children. Each day preschoolers learn more and more about themselves and their world. During these years children gain new skills, abilities and knowledge. This fact sheet will help you understand preschool children. It's important to remember that the information in this factsheet is only a guide. Children grow and develop at their own rates.

Nearly everyone, regardless of age, has fears. Fear is a natural emotion. What are some common fears of young children?



Fear of separation

Toddlers and preschoolers may experience many separations from their parents. Baby sitters come to care for them. They may begin day care or nursery school. Young children worry about facing new and strange people. They fear their parents will never return. Staying with your child for a day or more in day care or nursery school sometimes helps. He can get used to a new place, adults, children, and toys while his parent is nearby. He will feel more secure and let you go with few tears. Always tell your child that you are leaving. Sneaking out only increases his distrust and fear.

Fear of baths

Many young children worry about slipping down the drain with the water. No amount of talk will ease this fear. Children have to feel comfortable around water and they can do that by playing in water - in a pan, a sink and, finally, learning over the edge of the tub. Gradually your child will learn the bath is nothing to fear. Remember, stay with your children when they are playing with water or in the bath. Children can drown in only one inch of water.

Fear of dogs

Dogs are often loud and fast-moving. It's hard to predict what they will do. No wonder so many children are afraid of them. Look at pictures of dogs and talk about them with your child. Watch a dog from across the street. Finally, pick a gentle dog for your child to approach.

Fear of loud noises

Loud noises from vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, saws, fire engines and ambulances may frighten children. Let your child look at and touch appliances in your home before you turn them on. Visit the fire station. Let your child look at and sit in the fire truck.

Fear of the dark

If your child is afraid of the dark, it's okay to keep the lights on in his bedroom closet or nearby hallway. Over time, you can lower the amount of light. Some children decide on their own to turn the lights off.

Fear of change

Your child probably likes his world when everything goes along as usual. He may enjoy hearing the same story again and again. He may like eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every day for lunch. Change can frighten a young child. An earlier dinner, Mother coming home from work late or an argument between parents can be frightening. If there is a family move, a divorce, a separation, or a death in the family, your child needs special help.

When crises occur, be sure to keep daily routines the same. If you know a change is coming, talk to your child about it. The change may be a divorce, a new baby or a stay in the hospital. Tell your child how you are feeling about the situation. For example, "I'm unhappy because Daddy and I fight a lot but I'm not mad at you."

Children think differently from adults. They confuse fantasy and dreams with reality. They often think that objects are "alive." They have difficulty understanding the size of different objects. Young children don't understand cause-and-effect relationships. They feel small, helpless and unable to control what is happening to them. All these factors influence their fears.

Frightened children need to be told they are loved and will be cared for. They need hugs and someone to talk to. Never laugh or make fun of your child's fears. Don't get angry. Avoid frightening television programs and movies. Never threaten a child with the "bogyman" or spooky stories. Protect your child from older children or adults who might scare your child for their own amusement.

Encourage your child to describe a frightening experience through play acting, drawing or using dolls, puppets or stories. Sometimes older preschoolers can learn to tell a frightening monster, "Go away. I don't like you, and I don't want you to come back." This may help a child feel more in control of her life.

You can't protect your child from all fears. In fact, some fears are a part of growing up and learning. For example, your child needs to know that the loud scream of the fire engine means, "Danger, get out of the way!"

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