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HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE MONSTER BENEATH THEIR BED

Do you have a young child who is afraid of the dark, thinks there is a monster under the bed, or trembles from the noise of the vacuum cleaner? To you these fears may make no sense at all, yet to a child they are very real.

Fears start to surface when a child is around two years old and is part of normal growth and development. By this age children have generally experienced real pain or fear. They have vivid imaginations and are struggling with understanding cause and effect.

Separation anxiety is a common fear of children this age. Suddenly one day your child won't let you out of his or her sight. This clingy child is showing a sign of development. For the first time your child worries and puzzles over your departure – will you come back? Prior to this time he or she would forget you after you left.

To minimize this fear, always tell your child when you are leaving. Do not try to sneak out; this decreases trust. It may help to establish a ritual for leaving such as waving good-bye or blowing good-bye kisses.

As pre-schoolers, children are more self-assured. However, separation anxiety may resurface when children start school, go to a new child care provider, stay overnight with a friend or relative, or move into a new home. Help children ease into these new situations. Visit the new school before the first day. Spend time together with the new childcare provider. Keep familiar things around your child in the process of moving to a new home. Assure your child that his or her toys will be moved to the new home.

Another common fear of young children is going down the drain with the water. As children begin to understand cause and effect, they also experience some confusion. They understand that when the bathtub drain is opened the water goes down the drain. The fear results from thinking they could be sucked down the drain with the water. No amount of logical talk will change this. Therefore, avoid letting the water drain out while your child is still in the tub or even in the bathroom.

Loud noises can also be a source of alarm. It might be the vacuum cleaner, a hair dryer, or even a noisy toy. Try letting your child look at and eventually touch the item causing the fear before turning it on. If the fear seems intense, save these loud noises for times when your child is rested and in a good mood, or use the noisy items when your child is not around.

Many children sleep with a night-light because they fear the dark. This fear is one of the last childhood fears to be conquered. Younger children fear monsters and snakes that lurk in the bedroom shadows. Older children may fear burglars and thieves. It is not uncommon for children 10 and 11 to still use a night-light or have the hall light on. Do not rush a child into sleeping in the dark.

To help your children deal with fears:

- **Avoid lectures.** It does not help to ridicule, ignore, or use logic. Avoid phrases like: “Don’t be such a baby,” “Pet the nice doggie, he won’t hurt you,” and “There is no such thing as a monster”.
- **Accept your child’s fear as valid.** Provide support with reassuring words. Remember that some fear is good. Children should have a healthy sense of caution. Strange dogs and unfamiliar people can be dangerous.
- **Show your child how to cope.** Teach him or her how to take deep breaths, use one’s imagination to turn the scary monster into a funny monster, or keep a flashlight by the bed. Children’s books such as “How Many Kisses Goodnight?” provide a tool to talk about ways other children cope with fears.
- **Do not force your child into a fearful situation.** This “shock method” usually backfires and intensifies the fear. A small dose at a time is the best way to help children overcome fear.