

Everyday Learning Series
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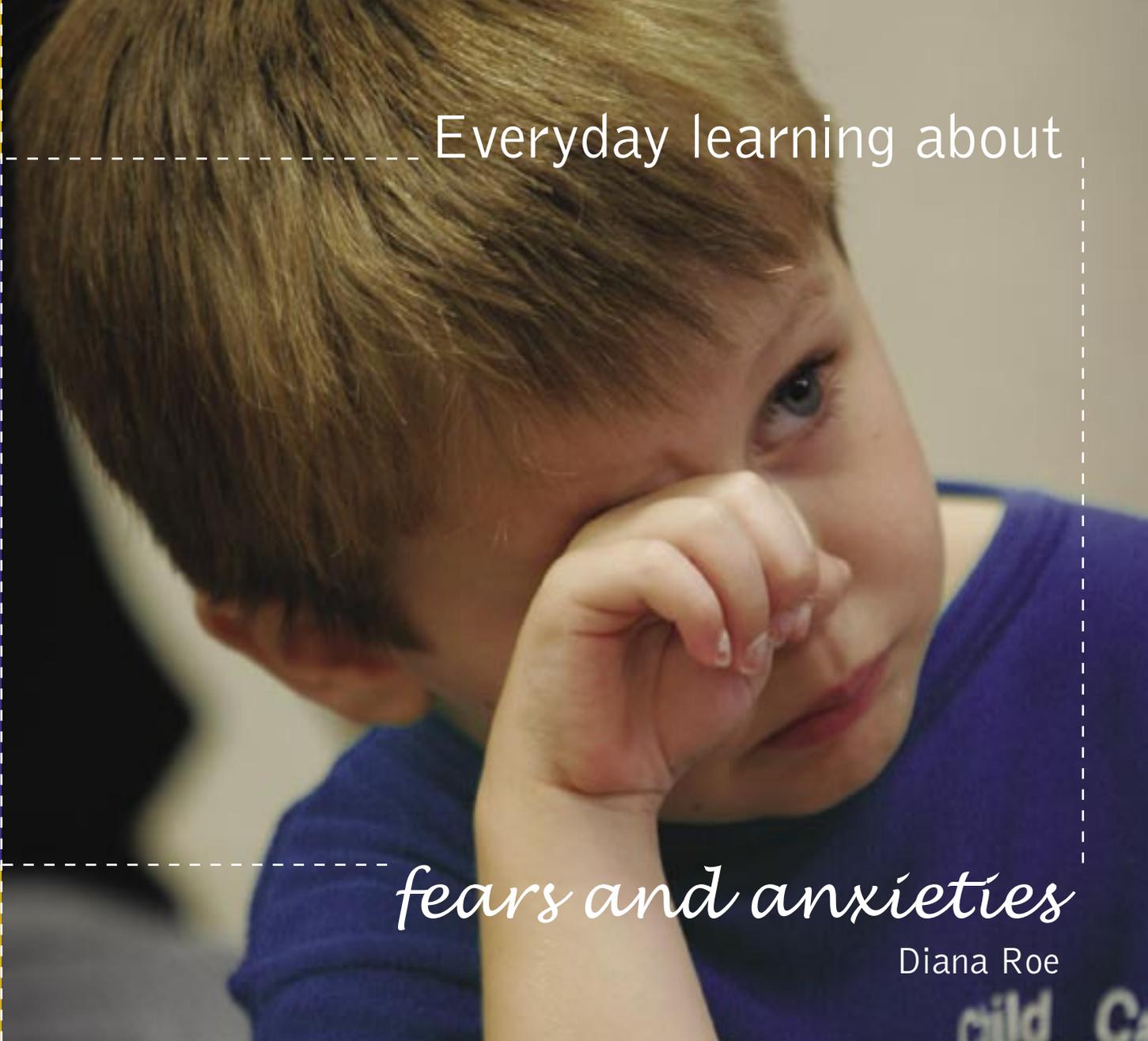
About babies
toddlers and
preschoolers



Everyday learning about

fears and anxieties

Diana Roe





About the author

Diana Roe

Diana Roe is a psychologist who has been working with children and their families for more than 22 years. She has a particular interest in working with children who are traumatised, anxious or in crisis. In addition Diana works with many young children who have a range of disabilities, including autistic spectrum disorder and attention difficulties. She has written a number of books on these subjects, and has also presented papers at a range of professional conferences. Diana's aim is to help children, no matter how young, to develop resilience and an optimistic view of their world.

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The most important early learning happens through day-to-day life experiences and the **Everyday Learning** books are about how parents and carers can make the most of these experiences. What an exciting responsibility it is to be helping build the foundations for the future of young children!

- › The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.
- › Every experience counts! Babies and young children are learning all the time, with most learning taking place in relationships.
- › Research shows that what happens in these years is the key to:
 - being able to relate confidently and effectively with others
 - mental and emotional health; and
 - educational success.

Babies and young children are learning all the time.

What do babies and young children need, to get the best start for living and learning?

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- › are warm and caring;

- › know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them
- › take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed
- › are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

Adults provide:

- › *responsive and sensitive care*
- › *a safe and interesting place to be.*

They follow children's lead by supporting their exploration and the things they like to do.

There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.

Living is learning and children learn through living. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests. Follow the child's lead.

Watch and listen; provide opportunities; give support; build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences. These books will help you to provide the best start for the children in your care.

Introduction

Bobby is three. He is scared of lots of things such as big dogs, loud noises, the wind in the trees, and even clowns. He is starting to find it hard to leave the house in case he has contact with things that worry him.

Anna is nearly 16 months. She has always been a happy, relaxed little girl. Suddenly she is frightened by any new person, and will not stay happily with the carer who has looked after her for nearly a year. She cries when her mother goes out of sight, and even starts to cry when her grandmother picks her up.

Dani is five years old. She has always been a 'highly strung' girl, but now seems particularly anxious. Recently her uncle died, but she does not want to talk about this at all. She is waking in the night with nightmares and has started to wet her pants.

All these children are showing problems with fear and anxiety. There are many simple things that parents and carers can do to help children like Bobby, Anna and Dani overcome their fears and feel less stressed.



'Young children are generally able to cope with the stresses and strains of everyday life.'



What causes fear and anxiety in young children?

Young children are generally able to cope with the stresses and strains of everyday life. In fact we are often surprised at children's resilience in times of difficulty. But some children are more prone than others to anxiety and stress, and all children are frightened sometimes. They may develop fears and phobias, or show other signs of distress.

Causes of fear and anxiety in children may include:

- › loss of someone they love, through death, separation, or moving away
- › upheaval in their regular life, through such things as moving, fights between parents, even a holiday
- › lack of clear boundaries; not knowing what is likely to happen or what is expected
- › a change in their circumstances, such as the birth of a new baby, a new partner coming into their family
- › sickness, both their own or that of someone else in the family
- › general stress and anxiety in the family.

Some children are just vulnerable to fear and anxiety. They are the children who seem particularly sensitive, who do not seem to have the usual inborn resilience of other children.

Remember, children will pick up the anxieties of those they love!

Signs of anxiety

When a child is frightened or anxious he may show physical signs of distress. Even tiny babies can be stressed and anxious and give out distress signals. A child who is anxious may:

- › revert to earlier behaviours, acting in a baby way or using baby talk
- › start whining and whingeing, or cry more than usual
- › lose their skills in toilet training
- › show physical symptoms such as tummy aches, headaches (mainly older children)
- › become listless and lethargic
- › suddenly become more angry and restless than usual
- › refuse to do things they used to enjoy.





'Having a regular and loving carer is vital for little babies, and separation from that carer can be extremely stressful.'

Babies

Very young babies have a strong need for love, for predictability, and for their basic needs to be met. If these needs are not met, babies can become anxious and fretful. After all, a hungry baby, or one whose nappy has not been changed, will not feel very happy. Having a regular and loving carer is vital for little babies, and separation from that carer can be extremely stressful.

Research has shown that it is important for babies to be able to predict what is going to happen. They also need to feel that they have some control of their surroundings. One of the greatest causes of fear and anxiety for babies is the helplessness they feel when they cannot control what is happening—for example when Mum suddenly disappears from view and they can neither see nor hear her.

Babies are always exploring and 'trying out' their world, but sometimes that world does not act the way they expect. A nice soft, furry dog may suddenly growl and bite, or what looks like a fun, shiny toy may turn out to cut and cause pain. These incidents can sometimes lead to ongoing fears.

Babies' common fears

- › Fear of their main caregiver leaving.
- › Fear of strangers.
- › Fear of sudden, loud noises.

Helping babies cope with fears

- › Keep the baby near you when she is awake, so she has the security of your presence.
- › If leaving the room, continue to talk to the baby so she can hear you and know you are near. As she gets older, she will feel more confident to play for a little while on her own.
- › When introducing new people to a baby, let her get to know them at her own pace. Putting baby on your lap as you talk to someone gives her a chance to get used to this new person. Glasses, a moustache, a loud voice, different-coloured hair or quick movements can all be frightening to a little baby, and she needs to feel the reassurance of your body as she learns about this new part of her world.
- › Babies need to have contact with a number of people. Having time with loving family or friends will increase baby's confidence and help her overcome fears. It is a good idea for babies to have short times with other carers they know and trust. They can then build up the confidence that, when Mum or Dad or Grandma leave for a little while, they will be back again.
- › Encourage baby to explore and try new things, and to develop some control over her world. Many toys are very helpful for this: a baby can press a button on her music box and know that she will hear the same tune, or she can shake a rattle and know that it will make a funny noise. Even the favourite baby game of repeatedly throwing things off the high chair or out of the stroller and waiting for some nice person to pick them up is helping a baby learn about predictability and controlling her world.
- › Playing games with your baby that help her to cope with loud noises can be fun, and also helps overcome this fear. Start with gentle noises, such as blowing 'raspberries' at each other; then show how she can bang things together to make a noise. A drum or other musical instrument can also be fun for making loud noises. If there is a particular noise your baby hates, such as the vacuum cleaner, let her look at it when it is not on, hold her close when the noise begins and, as she gets bolder, let her hold it and feel the suction.
- › If baby becomes frightened, don't leave her to cry it out. Give comfort and security.

'Encourage baby to explore and try new things, and to develop some control over her world.'





Toddlers

When a child starts to move around, and explore his world more, he may find things that hurt or frighten. This is the age of 'separation anxiety' when children develop a fear of letting their parent or caregiver out of their sight, even for a moment.

At about age two, toddlers are starting to develop strong wills of their own, and they can become quite frightened by their own emotions. A two-year-old's tantrum can be overwhelming for a toddler, as well as for the carer!

Toddlers may become confused about things that seem simple to parents. They may be unsure of the size of things ('When the water goes out of the bath, will I go down the plughole too?').

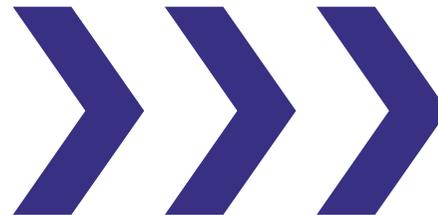
Toddlers' common fears

- › Loss of their main carer.
- › Separation anxiety.
- › Fear of strong emotions, especially anger.
- › Many fears that seem irrational, such as fear of falling down the plughole or toilet, fear of a gentle dog, fear of changes in the weather such as wind or rain or thunder.

Managing separation anxiety

Somewhere between 12 and 18 months (sometimes earlier) children develop an anxiety about separating from their main caregiver. Babies and toddlers start to learn about 'object permanence'; this is an important stage where they learn that, even when things are out of sight, they still exist. They develop the ability to remember an object or person even when they are not there. Once a baby has learned this, he may start feeling frightened or anxious that the caregiver he knows and loves may disappear forever, even if she has only gone to the clothes line! Babies and toddlers learn about saying goodbye, and that someone is leaving them, well before they understand about returning.

Separation anxiety can develop quite quickly. A toddler may be happily going to a childcare centre, or to Grandma's, and suddenly start to cry when dropped off one morning. Or an 18-month-old may have gone to bed and to sleep by himself for months, and then start to cry and fuss about letting his parent leave him at night.



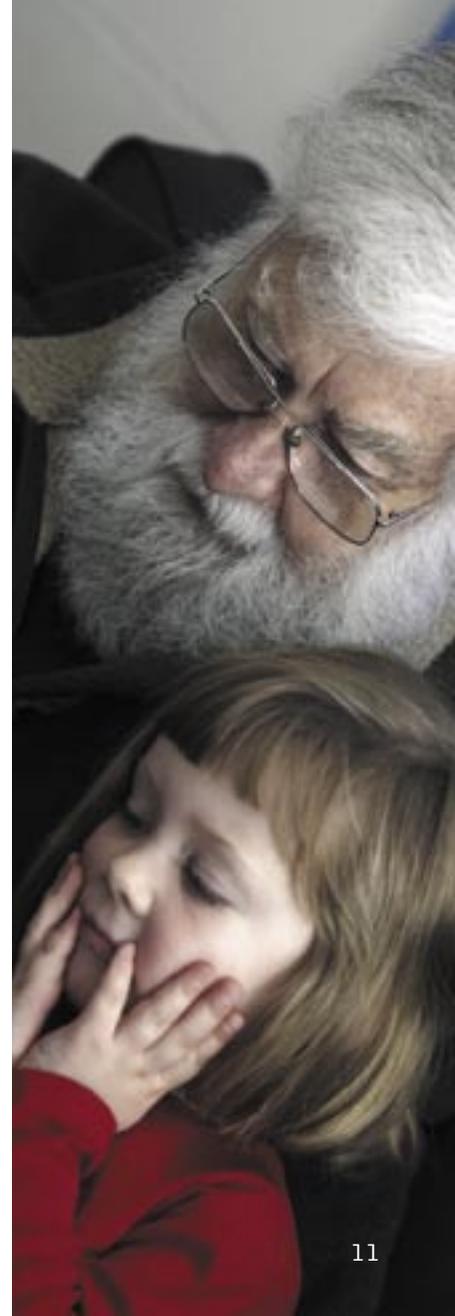
'Separation anxiety is a normal stage of development but, when it is handled confidently, most children can easily move through this difficult time.'



Separation anxiety is a normal stage of development but, when it is handled confidently, most children can easily move through this difficult time.

- › When leaving a toddler at a known place with known people, be confident and calm. Say goodbye, say when you will be back (e.g. 'after lunch'; 'when I have had my coffee') give the child a hug and then leave, even if he is crying. Don't keep coming back to check if he is all right, and don't sneak away! Telephone the carer/s after 15–20 minutes if you are worried. (Sometimes it is possible for you to stay with your child for a while until he is feeling more confident—this helps to give him some control.)
- › Sometimes children are comforted by bringing a security object from home, such as a stuffed toy or Mummy's hanky. Letting your child choose what he needs to bring will also encourage confidence that he can manage when he feels lonely.
- › Separation/return games can help, such as playing 'peek-a-boo' or hide-and-seek. Say 'bye-bye' and duck behind the lounge, then pop back and say 'hello'. These games help a child to understand about returning. Children will start to realise that the people they love can be out of sight for a little while and then come back.

- › Make a 'goodbye' book showing your toddler saying goodbye, playing and being happy in his usual setting, and then you returning and giving him a big hug. Read this book to him before going away, and let him keep it with him.
- › Try not to start a child at a new care centre or with new carers while he is showing separation anxiety. This is a time for giving him lots of security and consistency. If he has to go somewhere new, allow him time to get to know the new carer, over several sessions, visit the place he is going, and start with very short periods away. Be confident when saying goodbye, and say you will be back very soon (such as 'after I have visited Jill' or 'after I have moved the car'). Gradually increase the time you are away as he copes better.
- › If a toddler is showing separation anxiety at night, he may need a nightlight, a particular cuddly toy, or some gentle music or soothing sounds. It is not helpful to leave a child distressed, and you may need to stay with him. Some parents feel okay about taking this time for a rest for themselves. If you are not able to do this, you can, over time, gradually move farther and farther from your baby's cot until you are out the door. You need to take a few days for each move. This night-time anxiety will not last for ever. By the time your toddler is three or so, he will be able to know that you will be there for him even when he can't see you, and will be confident to go off to sleep by himself.





How to help toddlers feel secure and safe

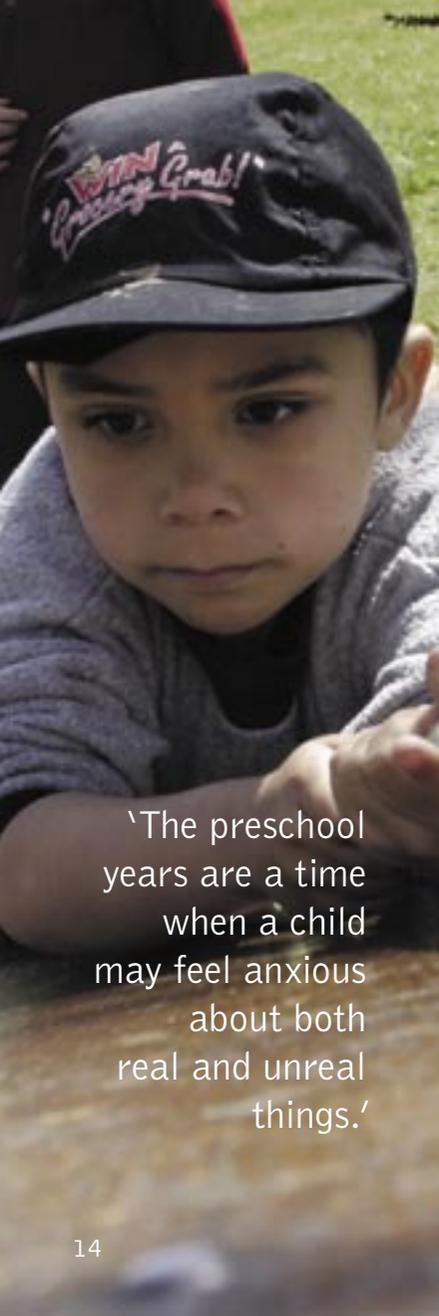
- › Encourage toddlers to use their words, and to talk about things that are frightening them. Words such as 'scary', 'don't like' are words that will help them express their anxieties.
- › Some toddler's fears seem unimportant to an adult, but to a child they are very real. Children of this age don't know about size and shape and time, so your toddler really is afraid of falling into the toilet, or going down the plughole, or being eaten by a daddy-long-legs. Once you know the fear, help the child develop some mastery over it. If he is frightened of the bath, let him get out first and help you to pull the plug out. Or help him to put the daddy-long-legs in a jar and look at it, see how small it is compared to his finger, then let it go outside.
- › Fears of weather can make it hard to even get out of the door on a rainy or windy day. Let the child watch the rain through the window; touch the glass with his fingers as the raindrops trickle down. Books about rainy days or windy weather may help take away some of the fear. Try bringing some leaves inside and 'blowing them like the wind', or play a game such as 'let's make more noise than the thunder does'. Sometimes it is easier to stay inside on a day that is really frightening to a toddler, but make sure you go outside when it is fine again, and look at the puddles or the leaves on the ground, and talk about how good the rain is for the garden.

- › When a toddler is angry and upset, the feelings can be quite overwhelming for him. Tell him that it is okay to be angry, but that you will not let him hurt himself or anyone else. Find a safe space for the child to be while he has his tantrum, then give him lots of cuddles and support when he has recovered. Stories about being angry or books about different emotions can help a child realise that his feelings are all right, and that he can start to control them. An 'angry cushion' for thumping, or a 'stamping mat' can be ways to help a child express anger without hurting anyone else, but sometimes these can make the child more overwhelmed by his feelings.
- › If a toddler is really frightened of something, don't force him to confront it. If he is terrified of balloons, popping a balloon close by will only make him more frightened and increase the anxiety. Help him get used to it slowly. Read a book about balloons, or look at some on TV. Then let him play with one that has not been blown up, and finally blow it up a little bit so there is no chance of popping. Once he is less frightened, he may enjoy a game with balloons.

General stress management techniques can be helpful for toddlers when they are upset, frightened or very angry. Learning to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth will help a toddler calm down and relax. Having a glass of water or a snack will make things feel more normal, and the child may then be able to face his worries more confidently. Physical exercise also can help; bouncing on the trampoline or just going outside to play may lessen feelings of anxiety and stress.



'When a toddler is angry and upset, the feelings can be quite overwhelming for him.'



'The preschool years are a time when a child may feel anxious about both real and unreal things.'

Preschoolers

In the preschool years, children start to learn more about their world. They are explorers, finding out about things beyond home and family, going out to more places and having more experiences. It is a time of excitement and wonder, but at the same time many more things are found that may be frightening or cause anxiety. At this age, children still are very much in the 'magical thinking' or egocentric stage where they believe they can cause things to happen just by thinking about them. So if Grandma gets sick after Billy had been angry with her, Billy believes that he must have made her sick. Or if Mum and Dad have a big fight, Jenny may think this is because she did not pick up her toys when asked to.

The preschool years are a time when a child may feel anxious about both real and unreal things. A child may hear the caregiver talking about money or health worries and think something awful will happen. Even watching the news on TV can cause a great deal of anxiety to a vulnerable preschooler. She sees scary things happening, such as riots or storms, but is not yet able to understand that these may be far away in another country and will not affect her. Imagination also causes many fears. This is a time when monsters, ghosts, witches and other imaginary beings can cause nightmares.

The fears of preschool children

The most common fears of children in the preschool years include:

- › fear of the dark
- › fear of burglars, or being taken by someone
- › fear of things that can hurt them, such as dogs, machinery, car accidents
- › fear of death, of themselves or someone they love
- › fear of things they see on the news, e.g. war, natural disasters
- › fear of their parents going away, separating or divorcing
- › fear of monsters and other supernatural beings.



'If a child has a particular fear that is worrying her ... help her to confront the fear slowly and at her own pace.'



Worries about death and sickness

Be truthful with children about such issues as death, and reassure them that you will do everything you can to keep them safe. Many times when children are frightened about the death of someone they love, they are most concerned about how it will affect them personally. You can tell them, 'I won't die for a long, long time, but even if I did, Jenny and Grandma and David would all be here to look after you.' Some children are so frightened about death that they cannot even talk about it. If the child gets very anxious or quiet when talking about someone who is sick, or an animal that has died, she may be terrified that this can happen to her. Try to give lots of reassurance that she is not likely to get sick, and that, even if she does, the doctors can almost always make children better. If someone your child cares about dies, even a loved pet, she will need support and may have lots of questions about what has happened. There are several good preschool-level books about death and grief that can be a valuable resource.

If a child has a particular fear that is worrying her, such as dogs or spiders, help her to confront the fear slowly and at her own pace. Many of these fears are quite appropriate and help to keep a child safe, but sometimes the fear gets in the way of normal living. Start with a picture of the dog, then visit a very quiet dog who is tied up. Slowly work up to patting a gentle dog, and playing with it.



Some people believe that fears of imaginary beings such as monsters can be helped by using the child's imagination to overcome them. Having some 'monster spray' beside the bed to get rid of any fearful creatures can be reassuring, as can devices such as 'dream catchers' or lighting a candle to get rid of ghosts. Other caregivers would prefer that children learn that all such fears are unfounded. Whichever you choose, you need to let the child know that you don't believe there are monsters there—otherwise she might think there is really something to be afraid of.

It is still important to deal with the practical concerns such as having a nightlight, and making sure that a child can call a carer if she has a nightmare. If a child is really frightened when going to bed, it can be useful to take her around her bedroom during the day and ask her to point out any 'scary places'. It may be a cupboard door that does not close, or a window where a branch rubs. Then the child can be involved in solving these problems: closing the door properly, getting the branch removed. Being able to help solve difficulties and remaining in control will build a feeling of confidence and mastery. If children are worried about burglars, let them help with making the house secure at night. If they are worried about car accidents, ask them to check that everyone has their seat belts on.

For all children, the security of daily routines and rituals will lessen fears and anxieties.



**'For all children,
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How can we help anxious preschoolers?

It is important that children know we take their fears seriously. As adults we can see how unlikely many of the concerns are, but preschoolers can be really frightened by such possibilities as a tiger escaping from the zoo, or a tsunami in the local lake.

Tips for helping the anxious preschooler

- › Don't ridicule their fears.
- › Take time to talk to them about their fears. Sometimes just discussing a fear can make it feel less overwhelming.
- › Help them to slowly build up confidence to deal with the problem.
- › Encourage them to work out ways to solve the problem. Ask questions such as 'What would make you feel better?'; 'How do you think this could be less scary?'
- › Some anxious children may need to be kept away from frightening material. Don't let them watch scary movies, or graphic news on TV.
- › A preschool child is going to feel more anxious and frightened when other things in their life are out of routine (for example if a parent is ill or away due to work demands). Make sure she is getting enough sleep, good food, plenty of time to play, and lots of warmth and affection.

And so to school ...

When young children start school many new worries emerge. Leaving the family for 'big school' can be an exciting adventure or a frightening experience, depending on the child and the support he is given. A whole day at school can often be very tiring, and some children find it hard to follow directions and be 'organised' for a full day. Many children start school enthusiastically, but after a few days or a few weeks feel less positive about this new aspect of their life. A few children start to develop symptoms of school phobia, and may need extra help to manage.



'A whole day at school can often be very tiring, and some children find it hard to follow directions and be "organised" for a full day.'



Ways to help a child cope with the stresses of starting school

- › Make sure he knows where to go and what to do. Visits to the school to meet the teacher will help a child feel more comfortable.
- › Help him to learn how to organise his belongings. Make sure all his belongings are labelled with a name or picture the child can recognise. Practise having morning tea and lunch out of a lunchbox.
- › Talk about his day when he comes home. It is better to ask 'What were some of the good things that happened today?' rather than 'How was school?'
- › Make times to talk about any worries. Some children find it hard to cope with playground time, and are unsure of managing friendships.
- › Some quieter or shy children are upset by teasing or name-calling from other students, even when it is done in fun. Sometimes it helps for you and your child to play games of calling each other a funny name (such as 'green eyes' or 'smiley') to get them used to this form of teasing.
- › Watch for signs that the child is not coping with school. Pains in the tummy, crying a great deal, feeling sick in the mornings, sleep and toilet problems, or not wanting to get dressed could all signal that a child needs help in managing this new stage of his life.



Encouraging resilience and helping children cope

Even children who are anxious and worried can learn to cope better with support from their caregivers. Recent research about resilience (Grotberg, 1996) has found that children can overcome and even be strengthened by difficulties. They need the support of those who love them, some inner strength and confidence, and the ability to communicate and ask for help. When a child is frightened, he needs to know there is someone who will listen and take his fears seriously, and will help, and he needs to know how to

'Recent research about resilience (Grotberg, 1996) has found that children can overcome and even be strengthened by difficulties.'

ask for that help. He also needs to feel confident that he has some of the skills to deal with the fear. One of the most useful things parents and caregivers can do for their children is to encourage this resilience. Sometimes that means not jumping in too fast to help, but offering ideas about how to solve the problem rather than solving it for him. Ask questions such as

'What could we do to make this less scary?'; 'How can we stop you feeling so worried about it?'; 'What could you do next time that would make you feel better?' Even with little babies, caregivers can help to promote a feeling of confidence that things will be all right. When a parent or carer is really anxious, a child will absorb that anxiety and feel less sure that he can manage.



'Give children a sense of mastery and control. Let them make some choices themselves.'



Tips to help increase resilience

- › Encourage children to 'have a go' at solving simple problems. Give lots of praise if they manage it.
- › Give children a sense of mastery and control. Let them make some choices themselves.
- › Encourage communication about things that frighten or worry them. Even very young children can try to 'use their words' to say what the trouble is.
- › Make sure children feel secure and loved and that there is an adult who really cares if they are worried or frightened about anything.

When to get help

Sometimes a child becomes more and more anxious, and the strategies suggested are not enough to help them. Consider seeking professional help:

- › if the child is not wanting to go out of the house because of worries
- › if the fears are affecting everyday life
- › if the anxiety is disrupting sleep night after night
- › if the child is prevented from making friends because of her fears
- › if the anxiety is causing obsessive behaviour (such as repeatedly counting things, or over-frequent washing, or needing to check things again and again).

Talking to a child psychologist or a child counsellor can often offer a worried or anxious child and parent more strategies to overcome these difficulties.

Books to share with children about fears

Crary, E. (1993). *I'm scared* (Dealing with feelings). USA: Parenting Press.

Crist, J. (2004). *What to do when you're scared and worried*. USA: Free Spirit Publishers.

Huebner, D., & Mathews, B. (2005). *What to do when you worry too much – a kid's guide to overcoming anxiety*. USA: Magination Press.

Niner, H. (2004). *Mr Worry – a story about OCD*. USA: Albert Whitman.

Spelman, C. (2004). *When I feel scared*. USA: Albert Whitman.

Wagner, A. (2000). *Up and down the worry hill*. NY: Lighthouse Press.





Books and resources for parents and carers

Chansky, T. (2004). *Freeing your child from anxiety*. USA: Broadway Books.

Child and Youth Health www.cyh.com When there is a tragedy.

Csoti, M. (2003). *School phobia, panic attacks and anxiety in children*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Garber, S., Garber, M., & Spizman, R. (1993). *Monsters under the bed and other childhood fears. Helping your child overcome anxieties, fears and phobias*. USA: Villard Press.

Grotberg, E. (1996). *A guide to promoting resilience in children*. From the *Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflecting Series*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Marans, S. (2005). *Listening to fear: helping kids cope, from nightmares to the nightly news*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Parker, J. A. (2003). *Helping children in times of need: Grief, loss, separation and divorce*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

Seligman, M. (1995). *The optimistic child*. Australia: Random House.

Supporting Best Practice www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/feelings_and_behaviours

Thomas, P. (2006). *Stress in early childhood: Helping children and their carers*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

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Many parents are concerned when their young child is worried or upset. What is the best way to respond to these situations?

Experienced child psychologist Diana Roe addresses a range of common situations in *Everyday learning about fears and anxieties* to explain how parents can deal with issues such as: separation anxiety; changes in routines; or fear of imagined creatures.

Using a range of examples—from very young babies to children starting school—Diana shows how anxieties can be overcome and resilience increased by encouraging children to talk about their fears, solve problems themselves, and make choices about aspects of their lives over which they do have some control.

Everyday learning about fears and anxieties will give all parents and carers additional resources to help young children feel safe and secure in our sometimes-frightening world.

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