

# Triple P Tip Sheet

## Primary Schoolers

### Fears

**F**ears are common in childhood and are a normal part of growing up. Most children's fears are mild and come and go at different ages. However, some children have fear that is so strong it stops them from doing things. Children can learn to cope with fears with some help from their parents. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your child to cope with and reduce their fears.

Because all children are different, and have different experiences, their reactions to the same situation can and do vary. This is why some children fear things that others do not. Children should be encouraged to cope with fears that interfere with daily activities and prevent them from doing things they may enjoy.

#### WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear involves worrying about bad things that might happen. Fear may also involve changes in the body such as increased heart rate, breathing quickly, sweating and shaking. A common reaction to these strong and unpleasant feelings is to avoid the thing that is feared. When children fear something they may scream, cry or run to their parents for comfort.

#### WHAT ARE COMMON CHILDHOOD FEARS?

Common fears of primary schoolers include:

- Being hit by a car or truck.
- War.
- Not being able to breathe.
- Fire or getting burned.
- Being sent to the principal.
- Falling from high places.
- A burglar breaking into the house.
- Animals.
- Getting lost in a strange place.
- Failure and criticism.
- Being alone.
- The dark.
- Thunder and lightning.
- 'Bad' people.
- Frightening stories in the media.
- Separation from parents.
- Imaginary creatures (such as monsters).

As children get older, social fears, such as fear of criticism, embarrassment and rejection, become more common and fears of physical harm tend to decrease. Some fears are realistic, such as fear of

deep water, electricity or savage dogs. These fears help keep children safe. However, if a fear becomes so strong that the amount of fear does not match the real danger, and the fear interferes with a child's normal activities, it is called a phobia. If your child has many fears that interfere with their daily activities, seek professional help.

#### WHY DO CHILDREN HAVE FEARS?

Some children are more likely to develop fears than others. As infants, these children often react with distress to strangers, sudden changes and noises. These children are more likely to interpret many situations and objects as threatening.

Some fears are learned through experience. For example, while walking home from school, a child sees a dog that comes close and starts barking loudly. This sudden, loud noise may lead to fear of this particular dog. The child may then learn to fear other things they associate

with the dog, such as all large dogs or walking home from school. The fear may even spread to all dogs, no matter what size. Whenever the child sees a dog, they may cling to someone, shake, hide or in some other way try to avoid it. If children avoid facing what they are afraid of, their fear will continue.

Fears can also come from watching others. For example, if a child sees someone scream at the sight of a spider or cockroach, the child may start to fear the same thing. Many children fear the same things their parents do.

Fear can also develop if it is accidentally rewarded. For example, if a child shows fear when they need to go into a dark room, their parent may go with them, turn the light on, and give their child a lot of attention and reassurance. Because the child's fear is rewarded with attention and the light being turned on for them, fear of the dark is likely to continue.

#### HOW TO MANAGE FEAR

##### ▼ Have a Discussion with Your Child

Be understanding and encourage your child to talk about their fears. While the fears may sound silly to you, they are very real to your child. Stay calm and let your child know that you understand they are frightened.

It is also helpful for children to learn that everyone gets scared at times, even parents. Talk to your child about situations where you have felt anxious or scared. Tell them how you faced your fear. Try to talk about how you handled a fear that is similar to your child's.

##### ▼ Set a Good Example

Try to keep your own fears under control. Try not to show fear when you face things that make you feel uncomfortable. If this is difficult because of your own anxiety, consider seeking professional help for yourself.



## ▼ Teach Your Child Coping Strategies

Teach your child coping strategies to handle a feared situation. Ask your child to choose the strategies they like or think will work for them and practise them before entering a feared situation. Here are some suggestions:

- **Breathing.** Take some slow, deep breaths, as if they are filling a balloon full of air in their tummy.
- **Relaxation.** Go floppy like a rag doll, so that all their muscles are loose and relaxed.
- **Imagination.** Distract themselves from scary thoughts by thinking of a pleasant, happy memory or an exciting event coming up. They may even like to imagine a peaceful scene where they feel relaxed and happy, such as a favourite holiday destination.
- **Self-talk.** Think of positive things to say to themselves. Help them to write their own coping statements to say any time they are scared — *It's just a grasshopper, it can't hurt me or I am boss of my body. Chill out and be cool!*

## ▼ Encourage Your Child To Face Their Fears Gradually

Part of learning to cope with fears involves facing them slowly and getting closer and closer to the feared thing. Remind your child to use the coping strategies to help them stay calm and face the thing that frightens them. Do this in small steps. For example, if your child fears dogs, first look at pictures and read about dogs. Then visit someone who has a small, friendly dog and encourage your child to pat it. Gradually encourage your child to pat bigger dogs that you know are friendly. Your child might prefer the dog to be restrained on a leash or behind a fence at first. Make sure your child can stay calm at each step before moving on to the next, harder step. Once your child is comfortable near dogs, it is important to teach your child that strange dogs may be dangerous and they should not try to pat dogs they do not know.

Gradually reduce the amount of support you give your child each time they approach the feared thing. For example, the first time your child approaches a small dog, they may hide behind your legs. Next time, encourage your child to walk beside you while you hold them close. The next time you may simply hold their hand. Each time you approach the feared thing, try to move further away from your child. The goal is for your child to face the feared thing by themselves. Once they have achieved

this goal, move on to the next step, such as approaching a larger dog restrained on a lead. Again, start with lots of physical comfort if needed, but gradually move away from your child each time they approach the feared thing. Praise your child for staying calm and facing their fear.

## ▼ Remain Calm When Your Child Is Scared

If your child becomes scared after seeing, touching or hearing something they are afraid of, stay confident and calm. If you get upset or give your child lots of reassurance or physical comfort, they will not learn to cope with their fear by themselves.

## ▼ Praise Your Child for Facing Their Fears

When your child stays calm while facing a fear, praise them. For example, if your child has been reluctant to invite other children home to play, then one day makes the effort to do so, praise and encourage them. However, be careful not to embarrass your child by drawing too much attention to their efforts in front of others.

## ▼ Encourage Your Child To Try New Things

Gradually introduce your child to new situations to show them they will be safe. Do not try to stop your child from seeing all frightening things.

## ▼ Help Your Child Face Things They Must Do

Despite their fear, children sometimes have to do things they are afraid of, such as having an injection or starting a new school. At these times, do not allow your child to avoid the situation. Some fear is normal. Prepare your child by calmly and honestly telling them what to expect. For

example, if a procedure is likely to hurt, tell them — *Lucy, the needle will sting a little bit, but it will be over quickly.* Do not look worried. Teach your child specific ways to handle the difficult situation, such as trying out one of their coping strategies. Afterwards, focus on what your child did well and praise them for using coping strategies.

## ▼ Talk To Your Child About Dangerous Situations

There are some situations that are a real risk to children, such as riding bicycles on the road, crossing a busy street, strange dogs, open fires and being approached by strangers. Have clear, specific rules about what your child should do in these situations and explain them to your child.

## ▼ Get Help From Other Children

Children often cope better with new and frightening experiences if they are with other children of a similar age. For example, if your child is fearful about starting a new school, a visit to the school with a child who already attends the school can be helpful. The other child can tell your child about the school and help them feel comfortable. Other children can also set a good example of how to cope in situations that your child fears.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

It can take time for children to overcome their fears, especially if they have had the fear for a long time. You can help your child by teaching them how to cope with the unpleasant feelings caused by fear and by encouraging them to gradually approach the thing they fear. Be prepared to seek professional help if your child's fears continue to cause difficulties.

## KEY STEPS

- **Talk with your child and tell them how you cope with your own fears.**
- **Try not to show fearful reactions.**
- **Teach your child coping strategies.**
- **Help your child to gradually face their fears.**
- **Remain calm when your child is scared or anxious.**
- **Praise your child for facing their fears.**
- **Encourage your child to try new things.**
- **Do not let your child avoid things they must do.**
- **Have some rules that tell your child what to do in dangerous situations.**
- **Get other children to help your child feel comfortable in new situations.**

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

Written by Matthew R. Sanders, Karen M. T. Turner, Carol Markie-Dadds  
© 1996 The University of Queensland

Printed in China by Hang Tai Printing Co. Ltd  
NOT TO BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED

