

HELPING CHILDREN OVERCOME THEIR FEAR OF THE DARK



Most children experience fears at some time during their lives. In most cases these fears are a normal part of development. One common fear that children experience is fear of the dark. Fear of the dark can take many forms. One of the most common forms of fear of the dark is fear of sleeping in a dark room. Fear of the dark can be a difficult one for family members to cope with. Since this type of fear usually occurs at night, it often interferes with the sleep of other family members.

What Parents Can Do

There are many things that parents can do to help their children confront and overcome their fear of the dark. Here are some suggestions:

***Limit the viewing of scary television shows/movies.** Scary television shows or movies often stimulate the imaginations of young children, especially after they go to bed in a dark room. Parents should therefore try to eliminate or limit the amount of such programs their children view, especially close to bedtime.

***Make sure children sleep in their own beds.** Children who are afraid of the dark often try to crawl into their parents' bed. This is often a very hard habit to break, so it's a good idea not to start it in the first place. If a child gets up in the middle of the night, parents should lead him or her directly back to bed. It is also not a good idea for parents to climb into their child's bed until he or she goes back to sleep. Such action may send the signal to the child that there really is something to be afraid of. Parents should, after returning their child to his or her bed, offer comfort and support and then return to their own beds.

***Encourage children to talk about their fears.** Talking about fears often helps children feel better. Many times children are unable to pinpoint exactly what they're afraid of until they start discussing it. Talking about fears also helps parents get an idea of exactly what their children are afraid of, and how serious the fear is. This information is useful when coming up with ways to help children confront their fears. Parents should also try to use these discussion times to let their children know that all people experience fear at one time or another, and that it's okay to be afraid.

***Teach behaviors that counteract fearfulness.** Children can often be taught how to combat their fears by performing some calming activity when they feel the fear coming on. For example, a child who is afraid of the dark can be taught to breathe slowly and imagine something relaxing (e.g. playing) if he wakes up in the middle of the night and is afraid. Listening to a favorite song or tape on a recorder can also help calm frightened children.

***Encourage gradual exposure.** Parents should encourage their children to confront their fear of the dark gradually. Parents should

let their children set the pace. They should not force their children to do anything they are not comfortable with. There are many ways parents can help their children gradually confront their fear of the dark:

>Play games. Parents can play games like hide and seek with their children, encouraging children to hide in dark rooms, or hiding in dark rooms themselves and having their children try to find them. Follow the leader is another game that parents can play with their children. Parents can lead their children in and out of dark rooms. Another example of a game to play is having children run into a dark room and stay in there for progressively longer periods of time. They can start out at a few seconds and work their way up. Parents should remember to take things slowly when playing such games with their children. They should wait until their children feel completely comfortable with one level of exposure, for example, running into a dark room and staying there for ten seconds, before moving on to another level.

>Use a dimmer switch. Parents can connect a dimmer switch to their child's bedroom light. Parents can then adjust the light to a level their child feels comfortable with. Every few days parents can turn the light down lower and lower until their child feels comfortable in complete darkness. Or, parents can give their child a flashlight and show him how to operate it, so that he has a source of light if he wakes up in the middle of the night and is afraid.

***Teach positive self-talk.** Positive self-talk is saying positive things about one's self to one's self. Positive self-talk is a very powerful tool for children to have. The more children repeat good things to themselves about themselves, the more likely they will be to actually believe them and incorporate the positive feelings that go along with them. Parents can teach their children to use positive self-talk with regard to fear of the dark. For example, a child who is afraid of the dark can be taught to say things like, "I'm not afraid. It's just dark. Mommy and Daddy are in the next room. There's nothing in here that can hurt me."

***Praise/reward progress.** Parents should praise each step their child takes towards overcoming his or her fear of the dark. Parents can also set up a reward system, with specific steps resulting in rewards. For example, parents and child can agree upon a reward that will be given (perhaps a trip to the park) if their child goes for three consecutive nights without getting up and waking parents.

***Chart progress.** Parents can encourage their child to chart his or her progress. This way, the child can see for himself/herself the progress that's being made.

***Seek professional help for fears that persist.** While fear of the dark is normal in most children, in some instances it can become a significant problem. If a child's fear of the dark interferes with his or her, or the family's everyday life and continue even though steps have been taken to cope with them, parents should seek professional help.



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