

FAST FACTS: Fear of the Dark

By Gail Conway

Fear of the dark is common not only amongst children but adults, too. Scary images and stories, common objects and sounds we can't immediately identify because they are masked in darkness, fuel our imaginations and grow our fear of the dark. For young children, who do not yet know the difference between reality and fantasy and depend on trusted adults to interpret the world, being left alone in the dark before they are ready can be traumatic and lead to a lifetime of sleep issues.

Did you know?

- In a study of Dutch children, **over 73% of children between 4-12 years old said they experienced fear of the dark** (Muris et al 2001). This is but one study.
- We rely on our sense of sight when there is light, but our sense of hearing when it's dark.
- Warmer temperatures during the day and cooler temperatures at night may generate more sounds as your home expands and contracts and settles at night.
- In most places around the world, young children sleep with other people, but in the U.S., young children are expected to sleep by themselves.
- **Infants, toddlers, young children and adults wake numerous times throughout the night.** It is typical for young children to wake well in to their 2nd year of life. It is only when young children wake parents that we know they are waking and say it's a problem.
- Young children do not have the life experience to distinguish what appears to be true from the reality, or have plausible explanations for what they do not understand. Consequently, **young children rely on their rich imaginations and magical beliefs to explain events and solve problems.**
- Making light of fears does not work. Young children do not yet understand the double meanings behind teasing, sarcasm, jokes, or feelings.

The solution to reduce children's fear of the dark is to help your infant, toddler or young child feel safe and secure. Building children's sense of safety and security begins during daylight hours and ends with some simple tips you can follow to tame children's imaginations and reduce separation anxiety at bedtime. It is your responsiveness, kindness and patience that helps your child feel safe, and grows their understanding of the DARK.

Simple Tips to Reduce Children's Fear of the Dark

Infants, toddlers and young children do not know the difference between fantasy and reality like adults do. Ask yourself, what a child is experiencing? What do they see, hear and actually know?

Avoid Exposure to scary stories, images and violence. Be aware of the grown up images on electronic devices, movies, news and television shows that other adults or older children may be watching in your home. Young children may be inadvertently soaking in those images and stories, too.

Minimize Screen Time and Exposure to artificial light (cell phones/ipads/television). Light and dark helps regulate our internal body clocks to know when it is light outside, that is awake time, and when it is dark, it is night time and time for sleep. Light just before bedtime may trick the body in to thinking it is daytime/awake time and may make it harder to settle in for a good night's sleep. Some children do not seem to be impacted by having one or two bedtime stories read on an electronic device. Please observe and decide.

Try to Identify the Source of Scary Shadows and Sounds. Look to see and show your child in a matter of a fact way, how a branch of a tree moving in the wind with a bright streetlight is that moving shadow on the wall, or the loud and repetitive sound coming from the other room is a ball being rolled across the floor by an older sibling. When possible, try to minimize the noise, use the eyes open/eyes closed game, eliminate shadows, or perhaps use a nightlight for a period of time.

Adults talk about their feelings, young children act about their feelings. Infants, toddlers and young children communicate with their cries, head turns, refusals to stay in bed and even in waking in the middle of the night. As a tired parent or caregiver, we may punish instead of identifying what is frightening our child. If your child is communicating in these nonverbal ways, try to be patient.

Reduce separation anxiety (over time). Young children cannot tell time. Help children anticipate what comes first, second and next through routines. Be sure to stick with the same routine leading up to bedtime. Positive words of encouragement; saying "I love you", holding and snuggling children and talking build those emotional connections and give children the positive thoughts, images and feelings needed to drift safely off to sleep. After the last bedtime story is read, sit or lie with your child in the dark. When your child is CALM AND AWAKE, find a reason to briefly leave the room- and IMMEDIATELY come back. Over time, as your child trusts you will always come back, you can extend the time out of the room. IF your child is fearful and doesn't want you to leave- stay until they fall asleep. Be patient. Over time when your child feels safe and securely attached, you will be able to separate. One side note: your child may want to continue to talk. You may need to gently say, 'let's talk more in the morning, now it is time for sleep'.

Adults are young children's emotional barometers and can sense your fear. Are you afraid of the dark? Do you have trouble sleeping? Even infants can sense a quickened

heart rate, a firmer grasp, changes in alertness or tone of voice. ***If you have fears of the dark or someone in your home is scaring you, hurting you or another family member, please ask us for additional information on the help available to you.***

Lastly, young children experience many firsts. It is your attention, touch and voice that are the calming influence. There are so many firsts and life circumstances that can impact young children's fears (illness, moves, job-changes, divorce or even a death in the family) to name a few. For more information on how to care for young children when these unforeseen family

PAINTED PILLOW CASE WASHING & CARE INSTRUCTIONS

FOR BEST RESULTS: Let the pillowcase dry overnight. Before wearing or laundering, designs must be heat set.

HEAT SETTING MUST BE DONE BY AN ADULT

Set an iron at the hottest appropriate setting (cotton/poly) and iron on the reverse side with a back and forth motion for 4 minutes. OR place garment in dryer for 30 minutes on the hottest setting. Colors may bleed during first wash. To minimize, wash separately in cold water.

Opening Minds USA is the trusted advisor and professional resource for people who educate and care for young children.

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FAST FACTS: Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers

By Gail Conway

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM INFANTS, TODDLERS, OR PRESCHOOLERS?

INFANTS

Attachment relationships between infants and caregivers are the basis from which all learning, growth, development, and views of the world are formulated. These attachment relationships begin with the day-to-day interactions of the caretaking routine as infants are fed, changed, bathed, and put to bed. Infants learn—as their needs are consistently met—how to trust, build relationships with others and view the world as a loving and nurturing place. In the first year of life, infants need a loving, consistent, appropriate, and responsive caregiver(s), to protect their mental health and grow into emotionally healthy adults.

Typical Infant Behavior:

- Infants and families learn about one another's habits, needs, likes, and dislikes.
- Infants learn the rhythm of their families' routines and begin to anticipate: feeding time, play time, bath-time, story time, and nighttime.
- Infants learn how to communicate from the words that are spoken, the tone of the voices and facial expressions on loved ones faces, gestures, body movements, and touch.
- Infants communicate their likes, dislikes, joys, and fears through their head turns, cries, smiles, arm and leg movements; feeding, sleeping, and elimination routines.
- Infants learn about the world as they take in their surroundings with all of their senses: hearing, touching, tasting, seeing, and smell.
- Infants' early learning is optimized when they have time and safe spaces to explore their natural curiosities and when loved ones are there to describe, interpret, and encourage these explorations.
- Infants' physical development unfolds quickly from birth.
- Newborns come into this world as fragile bundles in need of gentle handling, holding, and head and neck support. Within three months' time, infants' necks and upper torsos strengthen to support their heavy heads.
- Infants continue to strengthen and develop throughout their first year from their heads to their feet as they go from prone to upright to standing; from uncontrolled large arm movements to deliberate reaching to picking up small bits of food with their finger tips.
- Infants' perspective of the world changes dramatically with their advancing physical abilities. Infants see ceilings, faces, and the scenes in front of them as they are held and carried. This view changes as they are placed on the Floor

where they may see carpets, chair legs, and shoes. In 12 months time, this view changes again as they are able to hold themselves upright, pull themselves up to standing, cruise holding on, and finally walk—it is now truly a room with a whole new view to a curious infant.

TODDLERS

Like infants, toddlers continue to learn about the world from those who care for them. There are so many firsts, so many new objects, pets, people and places to name, describe, and learn about. A toddler's natural curiosity fuels her energy to endlessly touch and experiment with everything around her. Toddlers learn their value and how to treat others well (with respect) from caregivers who listen, answer their questions honestly, offer choices, honor toddlers' decisions, and have patience for toddlers to do things for themselves, in their own way, and in their own time.

Typical Toddler Behavior:

- Toddlers' natural curiosity drives them to separate from those who care for them and explore on their own but remain dependent on loved ones to foster their learning.
- Toddlers want to please their loved ones. As toddlers learn, caregivers learn to change the environment and remove breakables and untouchables out of reach to keep toddlers safe and provide the best first learning environment.
- Toddlers fear what they do not understand and depend on caregivers to make sense of what they see, hear, feel, and smell.
- Toddlers across cultures, typically around 18 months, use play as a vehicle to make sense of what they experience.
- Toddlers can be seen playing the simple routines that are a part of their life such as feeding the baby or putting the baby to bed.
- Toddlers practice doing things for themselves such as feeding, dressing, and toileting. Toddlers take their time as they study and experiment with the nuances of these day-to-day activities over and over again until they become more expert and they have committed these routines to memory.
- Toddlers fluctuate between doing things on their own and wanting others to care for them and their needs. This is a natural conflict and negotiation between toddlers' dependent and independent needs.
- Toddlers practice language and their limited vocabulary by pointing, naming, and talking a lot. As toddlers are exposed to more people, places, and things, and are given words and phrases to communicate about those people, places, and things, their vocabularies flourish.
- Toddlers learn about cause and effect by asking, "Why?" questions, sometimes over and over again.

Preschoolers (Age 3-5 Years)

Years 3-5 are the years children are continuing to develop their vocabularies, physical abilities, knowledge about themselves and their capabilities as they spend many hours at play in rich stimulating environments which offer new learning opportunities.

Typically, young children 3-5 years old are in the midst of formulating their self-concept. Preschoolers see themselves as others see them. Preschoolers' play; now, also includes more exploration into different roles and occupations. They experiment with their sense of themselves as a boy or a girl and the concepts of power, heroes, and the morality of right and wrong. Preschoolers' knowledge base about reality, cause and effect, and problem solving of situations is still developing. Consequently, preschoolers are literal in their translations of what they see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

Typical Preschool Behavior:

- Preschoolers do not understand the double meanings behind teasing, sarcasm, jokes, or feelings.
- ***Preschoolers show growth in their ability to distinguish appearance from reality but still depend on ego-centered thinking and magical beliefs to explain events for which they have no existing script, limited life experience, or seemingly no plausible explanation. Therefore, they rely on their rich imaginations to solve problems.***
- Preschoolers think the world is connected directly to them. They believe if they wished it or thought about it then they somehow made it happen. Consequently, preschoolers feel responsible for what happens to the people, places, and things in their lives.
- Preschoolers depend on wishes and heroes to exert power over their world and foster the change they hope to see.
- Preschoolers who are given words and time to ask for what they need are much more cooperative.
- Preschoolers are carefully watching the grown-ups around them and are learning what it means to be a boy or a girl, to hold a book and read, to communicate using words, a greeting card, a phone call, a touch; to know right from wrong.

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