

Hiding Fears From Children Not Always the Best Strategy

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DENVER — As young children develop, many go through a period when they are especially fearful of everyday events and things in the world, from dogs to thunderstorms and bugs. In an attempt to minimize a child's anxiety, parents often try to hide their own fears. But that is not necessarily the best strategy, according to Kim Kelsay, MD, co-director of the Center for Stress and Anxiety Disorders at National Jewish.

"Children are very perceptive and can often sense parents' anxiety, even when they try to hide it," says Kelsay. "Rather than pretending nothing is wrong, it can be more helpful if a parent acknowledges a fear, then describes how he or she is coping with it. That teaches a child to develop coping strategies for fears, rather than avoidance and denial."

Kelsay mentions one of her own anxieties as an example. Her children know that she does not like bugs. But they also know that she can deal with a spider in the house as long as she gets everything set up, from bug spray to disposal method, before approaching the intruder.

"The whole situation becomes almost a joke about how prepared mom has to get before dealing with the bug," says Kelsay. "That helps dissipate any fear and anxiety that might otherwise develop and shows children that scary things can be dealt with."

Childhood fears are common and a regular developmental phase of childhood. Babies begin to show distress when separated from their parents around 6 months of age. Two- to 5-year-old children can be very ritualistic and upset by the smallest changes in routine. Other fears can appear later, as a child becomes more aware of the larger world. Weather, snakes, bugs and germs are among the most common everyday fears, says Kelsay. Children who learn how to face and cope with these fears are more likely to overcome them.

In addition to providing an example of coping strategies, parents can also help children face fears gradually. If weather fears make a child so scared to leave the house on a cloudy day, maybe a child can progress from sitting by the window for a few minutes to sitting on the porch and, eventually, in the back yard. The speed of progress depends on the severity of the child's worries, and skill in implementing coping strategies.

Of course, parents do not need to share with children all the worries and anxieties that can come with being an adult. Young children don't necessarily need to be told about terrorists, biological warfare, or mundane money worries.

However, if a child asks a question about something that seems to scare them, parents should not respond with a bald-faced lie, says Kelsay. Again, children will often know that a parent is lying and will not be reassured. For example, a natural disaster or violent event that has received media attention may lead children to worry and ask questions.

The response should be tempered to the age of the child, but Kelsay advises acknowledging that bad things can happen and emphasizing that there are many ways to prevent them or limit the damage they cause. Concrete examples specific to the fear can help children feel more secure about the safety of their world. For example, a child that fears tornadoes can be informed about meteorologists, and air sirens.

When these basic techniques fail to help, a child may have an anxiety disorder that requires more intervention. Therapy, and in more severe cases, medications, have been shown to be helpful in treating anxiety disorders in children and adolescents.

The Center for Stress and Anxiety Disorders at National Jewish is dedicated to identifying and treating the causes of stress and worry in children and teenagers. The center offers group counseling sessions for children and teenagers suffering from excessive fears and stress.

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