

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Help kids face their fears

Navigating fear is part of growing up. It's important to remember that fear decreases (and sometimes disappears) with positive experiences.



All kids experience fear at some stage.

Many fears are normal and developmental, such as fear of separation, fear of the dark and fear of new situations.

Other fears – such as fear of the dentist, fear of new social situations and fear of dogs – are more individual. They are often learned, or occur due to a bad experience.

Author Gisela Preuschoff, in her book *Raising Girls*, describes a recent longitudinal study that showed how girls are more fearful than boys. The physical signs of fear, including increased heart rate and enlarged pupils, are greater in girls than boys. As androgens (male hormones) have a calming effect, boys show less fear.

Jerome Kagan, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, believes that excessive fear in girls is related to overprotective but well-intentioned caring they receive from parents and carers.

It's been noted that many parents allow boys to take more physical risks than girls, and have different views of danger for each gender.

Fear is okay

Navigating fear is part of growing up. Fear plays an important role. It makes us cautious and causes us to prepare for a new or risky situation. The preparation may be physical (*"I'll walk on the other side of the street to avoid that mean dog."*) or psychological (*"I'll be brave when I visit the dentist!"*)

Sometimes normal, healthy fears are confused with anxiety. Fear is unhealthy if it overwhelms kids, dominating their thinking and behaviour, or if it paralyses and prevents them from participating in everyday life. Fear is normal if it makes them wary but is not overwhelming.

Fears need to be faced

It's important to remember that fear decreases (and sometimes disappears) with positive experiences. Walk past a scary dog without being bitten often enough and you'll learn that it's not so scary after all! Give enough talks at school and kids will wonder what all the fuss was about.

Scaffolding is one way to help kids beat their fears. That is, if they are fearful of going into a new situation on their own, go with them for a short time, then find an excuse to leave once they have settled. Alternatively, leave them to spend just a short time in an unknown situation at first. Increase the time as kids get used to the situation. Scaffolding beats avoidance and helps overcome fear.

Validate your child's fears but let them know you have faith that they will be able to face them. Point out that they have conquered fear before – when they rode a bike for the first time, gave a talk, slept on their own with the light off for the first time – and they can do so again.

Other ways to help kids be brave and reduce their fears:

- 1. Increase their physical skills.** Increased physical confidence comes when children explore and learn to control their bodies. Gymnastics and martial arts are two activities that give boys and girls greater physical confidence.
- 2. Teach them how...** Parents protect kids best by teaching them how navigate new situations rather than by preventing participation. Teach kids how to hold a knife, how to walk home from the park safely on their own, and how to climb a tree and get down again.
- 3. Teach kids simple relaxation techniques.** Babies learn to self-soothe by sucking their fingers. Older children use other relaxation methods ranging from deep breathing, singing and self-distraction by, say, reading a book or listening to a story.
- 4. Show confidence and hope.** Kids often take their cues from their parents, so if you want your child to be brave then you need to be brave too. I'm not suggesting you be dismissive of real fears, but your confidence and reassurance can really help when kids have to face their fears.