

Help Your Gifted Child Calm Intense Fears

By Carol Bainbridge,

All children can experience fears, particularly at night, but gifted children's fears can be quite intense. That their fears are intense shouldn't come as a surprise since gifted kids are intense about nearly everything. Some gifted children can become so fearful that it comes close to be debilitating.

Some Causes of Fears

Fears can be caused by a number of factors. Some fears are the result of traumatic experiences. These fears are beyond the scope of this article, and although some of the strategies discussed here might be somewhat helpful, fears stemming from traumatic experiences may require professional treatment. Children who witness violence in their home, school, or church, for example, need to talk with psychologists.

More commonly, childhood fears may be the result of an active imagination. Gifted children who have emotional overexcitability and imaginational overexcitability can be especially susceptible to these fears and may feel them quite intensely.

Young children will imagine monsters in the closet and boogeymen under their beds. Moving shadows cast by curtains blowing in the breeze of an open window can make a child imagine an invisible creature flying into the room. Even children old enough to know the difference between fantasy and reality can become fearful at times. Older children develop social fears like the fear of speaking in front of groups. This kind of fear, too, can be the result of an active imagination. A child can imagine the worst thing that can happen -- making a mistake and being laughed at, for example.

How to Help Calm Fears

Telling a child his or her fears are unreasonable or simply saying, "Don't worry" won't help a child leave those fears behind. If it were that easy, few children would be fearful! Instead, give your child a variety of strategies to use to cope with fears.

Using the imagination

If a child's fears come from a vivid imagination, you can help your child learn to focus his or her imagination in positive ways. For example, a child who imagines monsters in the closet or boogeymen under the bed can use the same imagination to conjure up warriors or angels to come and chase off the monsters and boogeymen.

Work with your child to help him or her understand how to use that vivid imagination in positive ways. Practice during moments when your child is not afraid, during the day, for example. Ask your child to talk about what he or she imagines is happening during those fearful moments. Then ask your child to think of what could possibly happen to make that situation better. A child who is imagining monsters in the closet, for instance, might try imagining a knight who comes to do battle and chase off the monsters.

Your child may have a favorite hero or heroine and if so, your child can call that hero to come and help vanquish the imaginary villains. Children who are capable of imagining villains are also capable of imagining heroes. Children who are capable of imagining scary events are capable of imagining positive outcomes of those events.

If your child is a Harry Potter fan, you can discuss the spell "Ridiculous." It's another way, really, of focusing the imagination to ward off fears. Rather than conjuring up some hero or another to come to his or her aid, your child can imagine the monster and then imagine something that makes the monster funny.

Older children whose fears center more around public social situations rather than monsters at home can also use this strategy. A child who can imagine people laughing at them as they give a speech, for example, can learn to imagine people cheering. In this case, it's a matter of positive thinking. Negative thinking leads to imagining negative outcomes, while positive thinking leads to imagining positive outcomes.

Regardless of how old a child is or what kind of fear he or she has, this strategy takes time to develop. Negative thinking and focusing on fears cannot be altered overnight.

Using Props

Certain kinds of props can help fearful children cope with fears. One kind of prop is some item that can be used to alert the forces of good to help combat the monsters or other scary creatures. This prop can be a small bell or a stuffed animal that makes a noise when squeezed. Ringing the bell or squeezing the animal serves as a call for help, but it's also a signal to the child to activate his or her imagination positively. This kind of prop works well in combination with the first strategy.

A second prop is a spray bottle full of water. A child keeps this bottle handy at night when they usually become afraid. You can tell your child that the bottle is full of a magic potion that evaporates or frightens off monsters and other bad creatures. This strategy is useful mostly for younger children, although older children can use their imaginations to make this strategy continue to be useful.

For example, an older child might know fully well that the bottle is full of water, that there is no such thing as a magic potion, but you can explain to your child that imaginary magic potion works just as well on imaginary fearsome creatures. Again, help your child learn to focus his or her imagination to create positive rather than negative situations.

Props can really be just about anything that provides comfort to a child. Even a toy telephone that can be used to summon the forces of good can work. It all depends on the child and what the child finds will help stimulate his or her imagination. Older children can carry around lucky pennies or special charms you have provided. The prop itself isn't important. It's the focus that the prop provides that is important.

Some children may feel better with a night light, but other child may find the shadows thrown by a night light more for their imagination to feed on. Your child may need more light. Lights out is not necessarily the best condition for kids with overactive imaginations. If you worry that your child will get used to sleeping with the lights on, remind yourself that few, if any, kids go away to college having to sleep with the lights on!

What's important is that parents help their children manage their fears without stifling their imagination.