

ARTICLE NAME: **The Fear Factor**

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Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?

Not me! Well not wolves as such, but I do have other fears that have keep me awake at night, (as most of us do). Children are no different, whereas your fear may be of speaking in public, your child may be petrified of strangers. The principle of fear though, remains the same. Being afraid is part of being human and is designed to protect us from danger. However, we were not supposed to live in constant fear and this is when fears can become debilitating.

"Cathy refuses to go to sleep without my being in the room," comments her mother, "she is convinced that there is a monster hiding behind the cupboard door and no amount of opening and closing the door will persuade her otherwise. Its very stressful for me, at the end of a long day to have to spend at least half an hour with her, when there is so much else that needs doing."

Fear is the most debilitating emotion. It can literally paralyze our development, gnaw away at our confidence and stop us from enjoying the moment, while we worry about the future. Just as in the dream where the monster is coming after us and we cannot run away, with fear as a constant companion to your child, he will have less energy to put

into the normal stages of development. Meaning will be less able to explore his world, to act independently and to feel good about himself. Living in a constant state of stress caused by fear, can also weaken his immune system and make him more susceptible to illness.

Children like adults have a fear of the unknown. Only when you are three, so much more is unknown than when you are thirty, which can mean greater potential for fear. Added to this, is the fact that as a child's ability to develop mental images kicks in from the age of two and so does his imagination. Now, he can imagine all kinds of horrific creatures and events, yet lacks the ability to differentiate between what is real and what is not, which is why little people may have big fears.

Fear and intelligence.

Fear can have a severe impact on our intelligence says Bruce Lipton Phd in his book *The Biology of Belief*. "The simple truth," he writes, "is when you're frightened you're dumber."

Stress that results from fear was not intended to be a state of being, but rather an adrenalin response to immediate danger, should a large saber toothed tiger have crossed your prehistoric path. Fear was designed to set in motion the "fight or flight," response to a situation. The adrenalin that rushes through your veins when you are afraid allows you to be fully present and focused on the danger at hand. In response, it makes the heart pumps faster, so more blood flows around our body increasing our heart rate and speeding up our breathing, which gets more oxygen into the system. This allows us to run faster, jump higher or fight harder, than we normally would be able to do. Many stories have been told of super human events when people are in this "pumped up," state, such as the mother who lifted up a car to free her trapped child or the severely burnt man who was able to walk down 83 flights of steps in the 9/11 Twin Towers disaster. With the crisis over in a matter of minutes, we would normally settle back into our normal heart and breathing rate and the adrenalin would disperse.

However, in the world we currently live in, for many children and adults this state of "fight or flight," remains a constant state of being. As a result of the stress and tension in our bodies, we become more fatigued. If a child is tired because of stress, he is less likely to

be able to absorb information and concentrate, making learning a problem and affecting his general level of performance and causing them to achieve way below their potential. Teachers, says Dr Lipton, are aware of this in pupils who “don’t test well,” in other words whose fear of exams has them focusing their attention on the fear of failure, rather than on the required answers.

This is serious in the light of the amount of fears that South African children are exposed to, compared to children in other parts of the world. Inadvertently South African children hear of hijackings, murders, rape and robbery, as part of the everyday occurrence and few families have not been affected in some way as a result. How a parent responds to these events, determines the children’s own fear factor, which is why, especially with young children, its better to keep conversations revolving around these topics for adults’ only situations. Picking up on your fear, a young child might feel afraid, even if they don’t understand the actual cause of the fear.

A study done on 646 children between the ages of seven and twelve attending four schools in the Stellenbosch area, found that the most common fear in the children was getting HIV Aids, showing that while most fears in children are universal, certain fears are more specific to ones culture or environment. It was also found that girls are more likely to experience greater fear than boys.

Common children’s fears at different ages:

Fixed fears are those that remain with the child, while fluid fears are those that come and go. While the most common general fears in childhood are a fear of death and danger, the unknown, animals, general worries and situational fears, children commonly experience fear differently at different ages, so that a child of two, may be afraid of going to bed alone, while an older child may worry about his parents getting divorced after witnessing a row. Below is a list of common fears at specific ages.

Six months:	Fear of strangers. Separation anxiety.
Eight months:	Separation anxiety. Falling.
One Year:	Separation anxiety. Noises (thunder, lightening etc). Falling. Animals. Bathing.

Two years:	Separation anxiety. Inconsistent discipline. Toilet training. Bathing. Bedtime. Day-care. Strangers.
Three years:	Animals. Toilet training. Monsters. Bedtime. Bed-wetting. Crippled people.
Four years:	Noises. Animals. Monsters. Bedtime. Bed-wetting. Crippled people. Loss of a parent. Death. Divorce.
Five years:	Noises. Animals. Monsters. Getting lost. Day-care. Injury. Loss of a parent. Death. Divorce.
Six years:	Noises. Monsters. Day-care. Injury. Death. Divorce.
Seven years:	Separation anxiety. Animals. Monsters. Loss of a parent. Being late for school. Divorce. Personal danger.

As you can see from the chart, your child will outgrow most of his fears, but may then adopting different fears.

What adds or can cause certain fears:

- **Separation.** Sometimes a child may have to go to hospital or you may have to go away for some reason. That's life, however, being separated from your child at sensitive ages, can cause fears to increase. While you may feel guilt, your child may feel fear and a lack of trust of the world. You may need help, to allow your child to work through his emotions.
- **Inconsistent discipline.** If one day your child can put their feet on the couch, and the next day find that the same action results in punishment, the child starts becoming constantly afraid, trying to second guess your response to an action. Being consistent with what can and can't be tolerated creates a secure platform for your child to develop. Guidance and encouragement, rather than shame and fear, should be your preferred method of teaching your child the behavior you expect.
- **Television/videos.** With many homes leaving TV on constantly, children are being exposed to horrific events as a matter of course. TV cameras take us live into war zones, natural disasters and acts of violence which many children are exposed to yet lack the emotional/psychological maturity to deal with. As 9/11

was happening, as the tsunami hit Thailand and xenophobic violence blackened our own shores, many children would have been exposed to these scenes, literally bringing trauma into the home. As TV reports are re-flighted, children may believe that the trauma is occurring again and again. Naturally, if watching these events can traumatize a child, actually being exposed to them live, can severely impact their emotional development. The emotional scars that many of our children carry as a result of their environmental and social experience, if left untreated could severely impact their futures.

- Children leaving in war zones, places where terrorists are known to act, where disease is widespread, or where death and danger are a part of everyday life, will understandably carry huge amounts of fear.

What indications are there that my toddler or preschool child may be experiencing fears?

- Increase in nightmares
- Withdrawing from people or activities
- Toilet training regression
- Clinginess
- Restless sleeping
- Bedwetting
- Tantrums, defiance, and irritability
- Withdrawal and passivity
- Not wanting to go to preschool
- Loss of appetite
- Fear of the dark or sleeping alone
- unexplained physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches
- Not communicating verbally in an age appropriate way

Older children who have started school may:

- Increase in nightmares
- Appear depressed or withdrawn from friends and/or family
- Find it hard to separate from a parent
- Inability to concentrate
- May fight or display unusual anger/defiance
- Inability to participate in regular activities
- Loss of appetite
- Change in eating habits
- Be hard to discipline
- Unexplained physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches

Healing your child's fears.

1. **Dealing with your own fear.** Fear is contagious. Or haven't you noticed how when one person tells a tale that creates fear, another story follows exceeding the horror of the first, until by the end the entire group is feeling afraid. Such as: "My friend got followed by a group of guys in a taxi..." to "really? Well my next door neighbor got hijacked..." to "my mother's employee got hijacked and raped..." and so on.

Children pick up on their parents' signals and fear. So part of easing your child's fear, involves working through your own. If you exude calmness, it will help ease your child's fears. "If mum is not worried then why should I be?" Find what inspires, uplifts you and soothes your soul, rather than focus on what brings you down into a spiral of worry and fear. Make a scheduled appointment with yourself each day or week to allow you time to fill your own cup, whether it's writing a journal about your fear and consequently confronting and releasing it, doing yoga, having a long relaxing bath or going for a long walk.

Another way of working with your own fear is to allow yourself ten minutes a day to enter into your fears (as opposed to trying to avoid going into them). Divorce, financial ruin, illness, war, drought, making a fool of yourself - whatever has you coming out in a cold sweat - allow yourself time to indulge these fears. After the allotted time period, make a strict discipline that when fears arise, put them aside for this ten minute period each day. This simple practice will help you to acknowledge and work through your fears. As a Life Coach and friend, Brenda van Straaten, said to me: "I put my fear under my arm and acting in spite of it, move forward."

I recall the story of a toddler found playing with a highly venomous snake. The mother, on discovering the child, instead of screaming blue murder, which would have caused fear in the child and snake, and most certainly resulted in the snake biting, was able to quell her own fears and calmly persuade the child to leave the snake and come to her. When we don't fear something it holds little power over us and often results in protecting us. Dogs will sense fear and be far more likely to attack as a result. Author Carolyn Myss described how when she was in a foreign country, she found herself driving through the middle of what she thought was a carnival. When the mob advanced towards her car, she was consequently

not afraid and they let her pass unharmed in the same road where other cars had been over turned and burnt. Perhaps as US president Teddy Roosevelt said, we have nothing to fear but fear itself!

2. **Observe and listen to your child and acknowledge his fear.** Notice if he acts out of character and give yourself the space and time to pick up on any signals he may be giving you that all is not well. Listen to what he says and reflect back to him what he has said. For instance if he says:

“There is a dinosaur that wants to eat me,” you could reply:

“Wow a dinosaur! They’re pretty big aren’t they?”

“Yes and it wants to eat me up.”

“Eat you up? That can’t feel good?”

“No its not.”

Your child now feels heard and together you may be able to work at shifting his fearful fantasy into a fearless reality. Saying things such as: “don’t be silly it can’t hurt you,” or “stop being a baby,” not only shame the child, but may also break down his trust in communicating his fears to you. If he cannot communicate his fears, he will unconsciously internalize them and then act them out in negative behavior. Once suppressed, they are harder to deal with later.

At the same time giving his fears too much attention, can make him create more, as a way to get you to spend time with him. Use your intuition and find a healthy balance between acknowledging and helping your child work through his fear without placing too much focus on them.

If the fear involves a family member or caregiver, listen to your child. Many times I have encountered people who related that their parent(s) refused to believe them when they were children, when they revealed abuse that was taking place between them and a supposedly trusted other. If in doubt give your child’s safety preference over your own desire not to upset someone else.

3. **Let your home be a safe haven.** Even if the rest of the world outside is chaotic, creating order and routine in your home can go a long way to create calm. Let your home be a place your child can unwind, interact with you and experience routine. Have meals together, work in the garden or play a game together, read a book together or make supper as a family, all of which allow you and your child to de-stress.
4. **Creating:** Encourage creative activities, be it baking cookies or painting a picture. Creating is a soothing way to help release tension caused by fear. I have been running art workshops for adults for eight years and never cease to be amazed at how creating without a goal allows pain from the subconscious to emerge and be released. Often getting your child to draw his fear, will give you greater insight into what is going on.
5. **Dreams** are a way we connect with our fears symbolically. If your child is having a spate of nightmares, you may casually ask him to tell you about his dream. A technique explained by Soozie Holbeche in her book on *The Power of your Dreams*, involves encouraging your child, in a waking state, to confront the object of fear in the dream. For instance, say Ryan has dreamt he is being chased by a cyber monster with three heads and a big claw. While he relaxes in your arms, suggest that he shut his eyes and imagine the cyber monster, only this time instead of running away from him, safe in your arms, he is going to walk towards the monster. This act of getting back his power will frequently result in the object of fear transforming into something that is harmless for the child. I used this technique on my children and it worked every time in calming them and empowering them to deal with their fears.

I remember one instance when my daughter kept having a dream of a door that she was afraid to walk through. With her in this waking relaxed state she walked through the door, only to find that there was a lovely field and ponies there. Often it's the fear of the fear that has us shaking. When life forces us to confront our biggest fear, much of its power over us is also lost.

6. If the **fear of the dark** is a problem install a night light, allow your child some time to relax before going to bed. Going to bed wired after watching some super hero fight a demon beast is not conducive to a relaxed night sleep.

7. Teach your child to have some **quiet time**, uninterrupted by TV, computer games or stimulation. Lie on the grass together and follow the movement of clouds, spend time outdoors in nature, listen to Mozart or some peaceful music or take turns to massage each other.
8. **Faith dissolves fear.** No matter what belief system you follow allowing yourself to experience the bigger picture, can go a long way to work through your fears.
9. **Laugh together.** Laughter is a huge releaser of stress and fear. Find humor in the world around you or read a joke book, laugh at yourself or pull silly faces. Laughter dispels fear.

If you feel your child's fears or your own are limiting your ability to enjoy and experience life, get professional help so that you and your children can manage your fear.

Sources:

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Ann Gadd is author of five books published internationally and translated into in thirteen languages. Her most recently published book is: *Climbing the Beanstalk*, The hidden messages found in best loved fairytales, Findhorn Press, UK, 2007.