Children and Fears

There are many times in life when we can’t solve our children’s problems or get rid of their fears. But when children know ahead of time what’s going to happen -- and what will not happen -- they can prepare themselves for what’s coming. They don’t feel so helpless and are better able to cope. It’s important for us to provide a safe, loving place and a willingness to listen while children work through whatever is bothering them. - Fred Rogers

The preschool years are years of intense feelings when most children aren't yet able to use words well for expressing those feelings. Many things can be scary to them -- things that are real or imaginary -- and each child brings his or her own “inner drama” to things, so not all children develop the same fears. And some children are naturally more fearful than others. Children’s fears can vary; some more typical fears include fear of the dark, monsters, unfamiliar places and people (the doctor’s or dentist’s office), being away from parents/loved ones, and fear of thunder and other loud noises.

Where Children's Fears Might Come from

Sometimes children are afraid of things that actually do what they themselves are trying not to do. For instance, most children pass through an age when they have an urge to bite. It's usually when they're trying to master that urge that they can be very frightened of things that represent biting or any other form of aggression, like a barking dog, an alligator puppet with big teeth, pliers, a nutcracker, or even a picture of a tiger in a book.

Angry Feelings

Fears might also grow out of children's struggles with their own angry feelings at adults for making rules and setting limits, paying more attention to another child than to them, or for not giving them something they really want. Children are afraid of getting too angry at adults they love because that could result in losing the grown-up's love, so sometimes they project those angry feelings onto some outside thing -- a dog or a tiger or a vacuum cleaner or a toilet drain -- and they fear that that very angry thing may just swallow them up. Most fears like that tend to calm over time, especially as
children realize that grown-ups can be both loving and angry...and that the children, too, can have both loving and angry feelings toward grown-ups.

Magical Thinking

Preschoolers can think that things happen by magic...or by wishing...or by pretending. That’s referred to as “magical thinking”. At this young age, children are learning the difference between what's real and what's pretend. Monsters, ghosts, and nightmares might seem very real, so do scary-looking cartoon or puppet characters in movies or on computers or television.

Because children don't understand how machines work and how bodies work, they might think, for example that vacuum sweepers, lawn mowers or heavy construction equipment have lives of their own and could uncontrollably gobble up things -- even children! They might also worry, "If a doll’s arm breaks off, that might happen to my arm!" Even when a caregiver looks different because of a new hairstyle or different glasses, a child could be scared that the caregiver might have changed into an entirely different person. In fact, children sometimes wonder if just putting on a mask or costume might change them into someone different, too!

Managing Fear

When children can feel stronger than whatever it is that’s frightening them, they begin to feel less afraid. Our job is to help them feel that mastery.

One of the most important ways that children work on their fears is through their play. When children play about something that’s scary for them, they are in charge. When they pretend to be a monster, they are in control of what they monster can do. Then they don't have to feel so small, so helpless, and scared. Over and over again, children play about the same thing. That’s their way of mastering their fear. Each time they play about something, they understand it a little bit better. And they get a little bit stronger...and less afraid.

In the moment when children are feeling fearful about things they can not control—like thunder, the dark, or the doctor, we need to give them other things they can use to gain mastery over their fear. The two strategies below give children two more tools to use.

🎵 **Strategy Song**: Close your eyes and think of something happy.

On the other hand, for some children, opening up their eyes as wide as they can works better.

🎵 **Strategy Song**: See what it is, you might feel better.

*Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* closely parallels the gentle tone and emphasis on social and emotional strategies that made *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and Fred Rogers a TV icon. Fred’s creativity and innovation continue to thrive in 21st century TV. Teachers and parents will enjoy revisiting his messages with a new generation of characters.