

What Kids Worry About at Different Ages



Kids have worries - from monsters to natural disasters. They can appear at random or may be triggered by everyday events. A child's increasing awareness of the world, who is in it, and being able to anticipate bad things happening, can all serve to increase their alarm.

Many of children's fears can be existential, meaning they are indicative of a child's growth and development as a separate being. Separation is the most impactful of all experiences and stirs up the emotional center of the brain and can create feelings of fear. As a child becomes increasingly independent, they are less dependent upon their caretakers which may foster some worry.

Common Fears and Worries

The brain is a sophisticated alarm system that is meant to be activated when separation is anticipated or real. As a child ages, the shape and form of their fears and worries can change in reflection of their increasing development. The following list contains some of the common fears and worries children may express at different ages. Many of these things are related to developmental changes and immaturity.



0 to 6 months

Babies can show signs of fear at loud noises given they are unexpected and surprising. The loss of physical, visual, and auditory contact with their adults can also lead to alarm because the parts of the brain responsible for object permanence are not fully developed.

7 to 12 months

Playing shy is common at this age as well as displaying stronger protest, which indicates their brain has developed enough to pick a primary caretaker. They are still often frightened by loud noises as well as objects that suddenly appear or loom over them.

1 year

Separation from parents is a common source of alarm at this age and continues until 3 years of age. They can also be frightened if they get hurt, as well as loud sounds such as toilets flushing.

2 years

Young children at this age often exhibit some fear of animals as well as large objects. They may also state they are afraid of dark rooms with separation at night becoming increasingly challenging.

3 to 4 years

A young child's increasing imagination gives them the capacity to anticipate bad things happening to them or others. Their dreams may become more vivid with monsters appearing as well as other scary things. They can be afraid of animals, masks, the dark, and can seek comfort in the middle of the night when worried.

5 to 6 years

At this age a child may voice fears of being hurt physically as well as of 'bad people'. Their play may reflect these themes as they start to imagine bad things happening and they may voice concerns over ghosts and witches or other supernatural beings. Thunder and lightning may also stir them up as well.

7 to 8 years

Common fears include being left alone and can lead to wanting company, even if they are playing by themselves. They may talk about death and worry about things that could harm them, for example, car accidents to plane crashes. They may still struggle with fears of the dark, as an extension of their growth as a separate being.

9 to 12 years

The 'teen' may express worries related to school performance including a fear of tests and exams. They may have concerns with their physical appearance as well as being injured, and death. Some teens may tell you they don't want to grow up and are upset by this.

Adolescence

For the teenager, personal relationships can be a source of confusion, worry, and fears. They may voice fears over political issues given their increasing awareness of the world and movement towards adulthood. Anticipating the future and what it holds for them can become a source of worry, along with natural disasters, and other themes related to growing up.

Strategies for Dealing with Worries

For the young child, fear is often alleviated through connection with caring adults who provide safety and reassurance. As a child ages, their increasing maturity will mean they will need to find both courage and tears to face their fears. This growth can be cultivated with the help of adults they trust and can count on.

Play with fear

One of the ways a child's alarm system develops is by interacting with the world around them. While they may be startled, or show signs of fear, being able to play at this experience can help to diffuse its intensity. As a child plays their brain can integrate the signals as fear is less likely to hijack their emotional systems. Traditional games that can help include hide and seek, peek a boo, board games, to stories that include risk and fear.

Connection

When kids are worried, the best sources of support will come from their closest attachments. Listening to a child's worries, acknowledging how they are feeling and coming alongside them can help to lessen their fears. Coming alongside means to listen with full attention and to reflect what you have heard instead of problem solving or negating what they have said. If a child's level of fears and worries are more persistent and chronic, then taking steps to tackle anxiety may be appropriate.



Courage and Bravery

Children under the age of 5 to 7 are unable to exhibit courage because of the lack of integration in their prefrontal cortex. They are only able to feel one intense emotion at a time, so their fear can overwhelm them and when pushed, they can become frustrated, resistant, or attack.

When a child is 6 or younger, it may be better to use a relationship with someone they trust to walk them into things that might be new or scary. It is important not to let their fears take the lead in terms of deciding what they should or should not do. For kids who are older, helping them to express what bothers them is helpful. When they can find their words for what scares them, they are better able to articulate their desires that will help them be courageous in the face of what alarms them.



Tears

Fears can also be alleviated by helping a child express their sadness about the things that worry them. This will result in a release of the fear as well as some resiliency in the face of one's worries.



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