Helping Your Child
Deal with Fears & Phobias

It is probably safe to say that every child has fears in varying degrees. Some are the normal fears of childhood while others are not. It is the role of the parent to reassure a frightened youngster. The ability to do this well can result in the child's feeling secure and safe in his present and later life.

A certain amount of fear is healthy and understandable. It keeps us and our children out of harm's way. We teach our children to fear running into a busy street, accepting candy from strangers, swallowing unidentified substances from the medicine cabinet, et cetera. In such cases, we are teaching our children to fear the results. We are, in essence, teaching them caution which is quite a different matter from dealing with a youngster who is responding to an imaginary rather than a real danger. Such a child evidencing anxiety when there doesn't seem to be anything specific to be anxious about, whose fear is so great, it borders on becoming a phobia.

In a survey a number of years ago, the fifteen most common human fears were identified, some of which relate to children's fears. They are:

Darkness	**Public speaking**
Being alone	**Dentists**
Angry people	**Hospitals (blood)**
Rejection	**Spiders**
Disapproval	**Taking tests**
Failure	**Deformed people**
Making Mistakes	**Police**
Dogs	

Many of these fears, if not recognized and treated properly in children, can develop into more serious phobias In adult life.

Fear of the Dark

Generally fear of the dark occurs when the parents insist that the child stay in a totally darkened room at bedtime or when the child wakes up in the middle of the night. Some children are so terrified by the dark that their heartbeats actually increase. Parents need to recognize the fact that the room looks totally different to the child when the lights are out and should take steps to reassure the youngster even if the fear seems completely irrational to the parents.

1 . Use a night light but experiment with its placement to be sure that it does not create all sorts of frightening shadows.

2. After the light has been turned out. Stay in the room for a few minutes and talk about how different things look. A curtain blowing in the breeze looks very different at night than it does during the daytime.

3. Leave the door to the child's room slightly open and tell him that you will not be far away.

4. If the child awakens in the middle of the night, he should not be invited into your bed or you risk starting a habit that is difficult to break. Instead, comfort him in his own room and tell him that you are proud of him for being grown up enough to sleep in a room by himself.

5. Remain consistent in your approach to his behavior.

Fear of Animals

While the fear of animals affects almost all children, it happily seems to decrease as the child gets older. In the intervening years. A number of approaches can be made to lessen the child's fears.

1 . Don't transmit your own fear. Study and then teach the youngster the proper behavior around animals. (For example, always approach a dog from the front where it can see and sniff your hand.)

2. Identify the child's fear for him. For example, "Dogs can be scary, but this one lives right next door, and he wants to be your friend."

3. Consider having a pet in the family and choose one that is smaller than the child. (They can grow together.) Then let him help with feeding and caring for the animal.

4. Under no circumstances should the child be allowed to tease or mistreat an animal. This can provoke an attack or a bite, and then it will doubtless be a considerable time before the youngster's fears can be fully overcome.

5. Don't force the child to pet an animal. Let him do it in his own good time. Don't encourage hand-feeding animals whose bite may be bigger than the portion offered.

Fear of School (Especially Kindergarten)

School phobia, as it is sometimes called, may have a number of causes, both real and imagined, and it is the parent's responsibility to find out what is causing the problem.

1 . Is it fear of school or fear of leaving home? If it is fear of school, what specifically is involved? Fear of riding the school bus? Fear of failing? Fear of being teased? Each of these possibilities must be examined and dealt with individually, if necessary with the teacher's help. Finding a good friend, a buddy, who can share the bus ride or be a playmate at recess can be helpful.

2. If it a fear of leaving home, be sure the child is not picking up on parental anxiety; be sure he realizes that you will still be there when he comes home from school.

3. Discuss each school day with the child. particularly novel and enjoyable experiences.

Fear of the Dentist

Clearly this is often an unresolved fear from childhood since so many adults are fearful of going to the dentist. It is usually provoked because the child feels he has absolutely no control over the situation. It's a fact of life that children do need to go to the dentist at regular intervals so their fear must be dealt with and overcome.

1 . Choose the dentist and his clinician carefully. If possible, seek out a practitioner who specializes in children's dentistry.

2. Start early so the child will get used to visiting the dentist's office for

simple checkups when nothing except a cursory examination is required.

3. Teach the child good dental hygiene so that trips to the dentist will be minimal.

4. Try not to transmit your own fears of the dentist to your child.

Fear of Death

Children are usually curious about death, and this is normal unless the child begins to suddenly worry that someone he loves will die soon. The average child generally doesn't really fear death until he has seen it in a person or animal. It is then that he may feel the first inklings of his own mortality.

1. Be willing to discuss death with the child if he wishes it but use this as a time for reassurance, indicating that he really need not worry about it right now.

2. Be honest when someone close to your family dies either through illness or accident. It's the child's lack of knowledge that will cause his fears.

3. Be reassuring if the child thinks he was responsible for a death. Youngsters who are angry can think, "I hate him. I wish he were dead-" If by some awful chance, the person to whom the hate was directed dies, the child can feel responsible. Be sure that he knows he is not.

4. Many experts feel that a child should be over five before he is exposed to a funeral home or funeral service experience and only then if he is willing. Parents may want to describe it as a way of saying "goodbye."

Perhaps the kindest thing parents can do when dealing with a child's fears is to admit their own childhood fears, especially if the parent had similar fears when he was a child. Ile parent can indicate that he understands just how devastating such fears can be and that he stands ready to reassure and comfort whenever the child feels a need.