

- If your child is about to start daycare or pre-school, be honest with him. When you leave him, tell him where you will be and when you will be back. Keep your good-byes short and cheerful. Do not sneak away while your child is busy doing something. A toy or picture (security object) from home may help your child to feel connected to you even when you are not there.
- Most children who worry also have some physical symptoms of stress. They may complain of tummy aches or headaches. *Slow, deep breaths can help relieve physical responses to stress.* You can help your child practise slow abdominal breathing. He can then use this breathing to help him relax when he is worried.
- Visualizing something fun sometimes helps young children to relax (e.g., “Remember how much fun you had on the swing this morning? Remember how the sun felt on your face? Remember how the wind blew your hair? Let’s pretend we’re there right now.”).
- Make sure that your child eats a healthy diet, and that she gets enough exercise and sleep. Good physical helps children cope better with worries.

As a parent you may have fears or anxiety that you have not overcome. It is important for you to get the support that you need as children can sense your fears by your actions and words.

### Books for children about feelings:

- By Elizabeth Crary:
  - “I’m Proud”
  - “I’m Scared”
  - “I’m Excited”
  - “Mommy, Don’t Go”
- “Let’s Talk About Feelings: Ellie’s Day” by Susan Conlin and Susan Levine Friedman
- The Goodnight Caterpillar: A children’s Relaxation Story by Lori Light (author) & Kimberly Fox (illustrator)

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

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*This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.*

health information

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## Helping Young Children Cope with Emotions: Fear and Anxiety



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Young children have very strong emotions, just as adults do. You can help your child learn to deal with strong emotions through understanding and patience.

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### **Help me Understand my Child's Fears**

Certain fears are more common at certain ages. Babies and young children may be afraid of changes in the home, loud noises, or sudden movement. Toddlers and pre-schoolers may be afraid of the dark, monsters, water, imaginary things, heights, animals, or being hurt.

Almost all young children go through times when their fears increase. Fears usually peak when a child is 3 years old. Some children have more fears than others. These children may be afraid whenever they face a new situation. Your response to your child's fear can help her to find ways to overcome it.

### **How can I help my child overcome fears?**

- Label and acknowledge your child's fear. For example, in a calm and gentle voice you could say, "It looks like you're afraid to go into the water."
- You can help your child to learn and practise the best behaviour to use in new situations. For example, if she is afraid of dogs you could talk about, and then practise, what she should do when she sees a dog.
- Tell your child that it is okay to talk about being afraid. Tell him that even grown-ups are afraid sometimes.

- When your child is able to cope with his fear, be sure to give him praise and positive encouragement. Some young children respond well to incentives (e.g., "After your appointment at the doctor, we'll go to the playground".)
- Do not ever force a child into a situation he or she is afraid of. For example, a child who is afraid of the water should not be forced to go in.
- Do not make fun of or tease him about his fear.
- Listen to your child's fears. Encourage him to talk about them if he can. Do not try to force him to talk about it. Holding his hand or giving him a hug will help him to feel more secure and confident. Try not to give too much advice.
- When introducing your child to something new, let him take his time and stay close until he's ready to try it out. Tell him that you are sure he will be able to handle the fear (e.g., "I'm sure this seems scary to you, but I believe you can do it.").
- Try not to reinforce your child's fear by overreacting. Try not to show your own fear in front of your child. Children are greatly influenced by your reaction.
- Use play as a strategy to help your child deal with fears. You can play act or role-play to help give your child a sense of control.

- You can read children's books about fears, or ask you child to draw his or her fear.

### **Help me Understand my Child's Anxiety**

Most children show anxiety and a tendency to worry from time to time. For infants, the most common anxiety is "stranger anxiety", which begins at about 8 months of age. At about 12–18 months, children also begin to show "separation anxiety", which is normal for this age. Your child may become anxious when he or she is starting playschool or at other times when feeling stressed.

Children usually become anxious when they:

- don't have control
- don't know what will happen
- don't have ways to cope or deal with something

### **How can I help my child overcome worry and anxiety?**

Here are some ways to help your child to cope:

- Always be honest with your child about what is to happen in new situations. Tell her what is going to happen and what she will need to do (e.g., "After dinner, the babysitter is coming. I will need you to help me choose some toys that you would like to play with while she's here.").