

## **The Haunted House: Dealing with Childhood Fears**

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Halloween is a fun time of year, with costumes, candy and make-believe adventures. It can also be a time full of fear and anxiety due to Halloween TV specials, scary costumes, and teenage pranks. Therefore, it seems like an opportune time to discuss how to handle childhood fears, in many shapes and sizes. To help explore this topic (and stick with our Halloween theme), let's use the metaphor of that favorite Halloween outing, the Haunted House, as we learn how to address anticipatory anxiety and specific phobias, including separation anxiety.

If you've ever gone to a Haunted House yourself, you know that the fun starts before you even enter the doors. Waiting outside, in the dark and the cold, some ghosts and ghouls show up to give you a preview of the tricks and treats waiting within. For the excited teens waiting for the thrill of the scare, this is part of the fun. But for the uninitiated, or the fearful, this can be torture. Who knows where they will show up next? Who knows what they might do to you? If it's this bad now, what will it be like inside?

Anticipatory anxiety can be the most difficult form to face, because it is dealing with the unknown. The "what if's" can be overwhelming, and impossible to answer. As caregivers, we instinctually try to help by soothing and telling the anxious child that "everything will be OK." For a highly anxious person, this can actually be the WORST thing you can say! How do you know everything will be OK? You can't know, and the child knows that. Instead, try playing the Worst Case Scenario game. What if he's right? What if all the things he's worrying about do come true, what then? Helping him to see that there is a way out, that the world will go on, can actually be more soothing than denying the possibility of his fears.

When the anticipatory anxiety is of a reality-based fear (e.g. a spelling test) or a transition (a substitute teacher), then use soothing rituals and routines to try to help the child get through the fearful situation. Familiar routines and soothing objects, such as a stuffed animal friend waiting in the backpack, can make a scary situation seem less out of the ordinary, and therefore less scary. Helping the child to know what to expect by explaining what is likely to happen, reading stories of kids in similar situations, even making them up if necessary, will help to take away the "unknown" element, therefore lessening the fear.

Once we enter the Haunted House, the type of fear that we face changes. Now, we are facing the stuff of nightmares. Freddie, Jason, that Texas Chainsaw guy, all brought to life before our eyes. This is where we face our fears, our phobias, and the things that go bump in the night.

One of the most common childhood fears is Separation Anxiety. While this is normal in the toddler years, it often re-occurs when major transitions are faced, such as starting kindergarten or all-day school in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I even see it returning often in middle school, as the increased expectations of school make some kids crave the safety and security of home. Separation anxiety is real, and, like most fears, must be faced to be overcome. Allowing the child to stay home, or the mom to stay at the school, is an avoidant strategy that will only allow the fear to grow stronger next time. The same is true when dealing with real life "monsters", such as the neighbor's dog, scary Halloween costumes, playground bullies, or Aunt Betsy's musty smelling basement.

Aureen Pinto Wagner uses the Worry Hill to help explain to children how important it is to face a fear. Just like riding a bike up a steep hill, it is hard work to separate from mom, or face other phobias, but once we get to the top of the hill, the peak of the fear, it is never as bad as it seems. On the other side, you can coast down the hill, flying fast and free with minimal effort. The other side of the fear is the same way. And the memory of how much easier it was than it appeared will make it easier the next time, and the next time, until what once seemed to be a mountain is now just a bump in the road. She cautions against jumping off the side of the hill before reaching the peak by avoiding the fearful situation. This will only serve to make the climb seem even harder, maybe even impossible, the next time around.

We can help kids to feel brave enough to face their fear through make believe. For Halloween, allow them to dress as powerful figures, such as the brave knight or the fairy princess with magical powers that can ward off the evil-doers. Test anxiety can be relieved by giving the child a "Magic Pencil," that only knows how to write correct answers. Of course, don't enact magic powers unless you can be sure that the perceived threat is unrealistic. Role play can also be a great way for a child to act out ways to deal with a scary situation before facing the real thing. Adults can take on the role of the child to model bravery and new coping skills, or the child can try them on for size to have a successful dress rehearsal.

When helping to prepare a child for facing a fear, remember to project confidence that the child is able to succeed. *Your* anxiety about her inability to face *her* anxiety can make the situation worse, or even create worry that wasn't there to begin with.

We have now completed our tour of the Haunted House, and the horrors that lie within and without. I hope the fears and anxieties you found here will now be a little easier to manage the next time around. Anxiety is a normal part of life, and something each of us must learn how to face. Helping children to learn how to cope with their fears is a tremendous gift that will enhance their lives for years to come.