



Thriving in Today's Times: Recognizing and Addressing Your Child's Fears

*Ann Michelle Daniels, Extension family life, parenting, and child care specialist
Marilyn F. Rasmussen, Extension 4-H/youth development specialist
College of Family and Consumer Sciences, SDSU*

Give your children credit. They are more aware of what's happening in your family than you think.

Your children pick up on your moods. Are you trying to hide your worry over the economy, a possible job loss, or the stress your partner is under? Your children will be the first to know something's not right—and begin worrying, too.

And your children probably watch more television than you do; it is filled with reports of the poor economy and the high unemployment rate. Your children may come to fear that they could lose their home or have to move away from their friends. It is important to recognize that emotional stress can affect everyone in the family, from very young children to adolescents to adults. Despite age differences, there is a common emotional feeling of loss of control and loss of stability (National Mental Health and Education Center 2001). Because children often cannot express these feelings in words, their fears and stress are revealed in self-centered reactions.

Typical stress behaviors, like anything else, follow the normal developmental stages. For instance, preschoolers may regress to bed-wetting and thumb sucking, and they may fear sleeping alone and may become easily agitated.

Elementary students may become irritable, aggressive, clingy, or experience poor concentration. Young adolescents may complain of more headaches or stomachaches, have trouble sleeping, and perform poorly in school. Older

adolescents may become more agitated and less interested in friends and show an increase in irresponsible behavior.

Children of any age need structure in their lives. If they believe the safety and security they have experienced in the family has been lost, they will be overwhelmed by fears. They may feel that if any stressful situation—drought, fire, tornadoes, terrorism, blizzards, unemployment, loss of home—can happen, then other bad things can happen, too (Waddell and Thomas 1998).

One of the most constructive and healing actions that parents can take to alleviate fears in their children is to manage their own adult behaviors. Parents should take control of their own stresses and emotions; doing so is not only good for the parents, it also shows the children that the family is solid and that maybe things aren't as bad as they seem. Additionally, it is important to keep the family's routine as regular as possible.

Parents also need to look beyond the bed-wetting, irritability, and other irregular behaviors, especially if they have recently appeared. Recent, unusual misbehavior is often a symptom of a deeper problem, such as a fear that the child may not be able to express.

Help your children understand that it is OK to be scared or angry. Explain that talking about fear can often help alleviate anxiety. You might say, "I can see that you are upset that we have to move," or, "You are afraid we will lose our house to the bank." Create a comfortable atmosphere, take

your time, and draw the child into the conversation. Make it “safe” to verbalize his/her fears.

If you are asked a question you can’t answer, don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know,” and, “Maybe we can work on that together!”

Be prepared to hear the same question over and over. Often children will repeat their questions or hint at the same problem again and again. They do this for several reasons. First, they need to make sure their information is right. If they repeat it and adults agree with what they are saying, then they feel they have some understanding of the situation. Second, if they repeat it and they get the same reassurances every time, they feel the situation is more controlled. Continue to give those reassurances.

Some simple strategies to decrease children’s fears include monitoring the amount of television they watch. Television may continually remind the child about a stressful event.

Watch the news with your children. Take time to discuss how the news relates to your family. Ask the child if he or she has any questions or concerns. Make sure you explain the news at an appropriate level for your child’s developmental age. Above all else, reassure your children that they can always talk to you about their fears and concerns.

Other strategies include encouraging your child to write about or draw pictures of their fears. Providing play or humorous situations can help decrease tension.

You will want to reassure your children that the family can cope with this problem, and since they are members of the family they can help. Don’t deny the seriousness of the situation or give false reassurances but let them know that there are some efforts being made to address the situation and that their contributions to solving the problems are valuable.

Help your children concentrate on the positive parts of their lives. For example, let them help plan a low-cost family activity such as a picnic at the lake or a family game night. It is important for parents to help their children to recognize the family’s strengths. Children can cope better with their own fears if they feel supported by their family.

The child should see that the family is working to regain control. It is important for children to feel they also have a role in recovery. Suggest what activities might be helpful. These may include extra chores or even an effort to decrease sibling rivalry.

Encourage children to think beyond their personal troubles. Together you might plant a new tree to help begin replacing a forest. Or you might bake cookies for neighbors in need or simply visit some elderly friends or relatives.

Above all, be honest with your children. Acknowledge your own fears but assure the child that the family gathers its strength from working together and that problems can be overcome.

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