



Tender Hearts Child Therapy Center

Parent Newsletter

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Little Kids, Big Fears: Dealing with Toddler Fears

Fear is fairly common among toddlers. However, as parents, it's important to know how to properly handle toddler fears so that they don't become phobias as the child grows older.

In order to most effectively deal with toddler fears, it's important to understand why toddlers develop fears. The toddler years are ones of great change. Toddlers are learning lots of information, but yet don't have the life experience to understand the irrational fears they may have. For example, a toddler can understand the concept that the vacuum cleaner sucks up dust and dirt; however in the toddler's underdeveloped brain, she doesn't understand that it won't suck her up too. Toddlers also have a sense of how small they are in this world. Remember that to them, we're all giants. The large size of everything in their world can be intimidating to a toddler. Another contributing factor is the toddler's imagination. While the imagination can be a great source of fun for a toddler, it can also be quite frightening. Being transported to castles is quite fun, while being transported to a witch's lair is not. Remember, too, that toddlers also have a developing memory. For infants, out of sight-out of mind prevails. However, toddlers can remember events, real and fictional. Falling out of a swing, might provoke a fear of playgrounds. Watching Red Riding Hood may provoke a fear of grandma being eaten by a wolf. Toddlers are also self-centered. All experiences can happen to them. If a playmate gets stung by a bee, so can they. Finally, toddlers are more sensitive to other's emotions. If others are afraid or anxious, they can be too.

Now that we've discussed many of the sources of toddler fears, how can parents effectively deal with these fears? The first thing parents should do is acknowledge the fear. Fears are real to toddlers, no matter how irrational they may be. Ignoring or dismissing the fear will not help your toddler overcome the fear. Letting your toddler know that fears are normal and that everyone has fears will help your child know that she is not alone. Try telling your toddler a story of a fear you had that you overcame. Just be careful to keep it in simple terms and not introduce a new fear. If your child has never been afraid of water, don't introduce it as something to be afraid of. On the other hand, forcing your toddler to confront her fear head-on is rarely effective and may make the fear turn into a phobia. Simply telling your toddler to "be brave" or "be a big girl" or teasing your toddler about the fear also isn't likely to work.

One thing to remember is that toddlers aren't in control of much of their environment, so it's important for parents to be encouraging and supportive in situations when the toddler is afraid. Boost your toddler's self-confidence when she makes even the smallest steps towards facing her fears. Be calm and confident when facing a situation where your toddler might be afraid and she is likely to feel supported and secure in these scary situations. However, don't be overly protective. Coddling a toddler will only reinforce the fear because it tells the child that there really is something to be afraid of.

Parents should also be on the watch for potentially scary situations. Monitor your child's exposure to scary books, television, movies, even conversations. While your toddler might not look like she's paying attention, even the slightest glimpse of a scary image on a television screen might cause a fear.

Finally, parents should watch their own actions when dealing with toddler fears. If mom jumps every time she sees a spider, the toddler might develop a fear of spiders. If a toddler sees a cat for the first time and mom says, "Don't be afraid" the toddler may think there is something to be afraid of. However, if mom says, "See the pretty kitty. It wants to say hello to you" then the child is more likely to not feel afraid.