

Coping with fears and worries

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for early primary aged children, but can be modified for use with older ages. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

Parents and carers are usually the first people children look to for support and reassurance when they are scared or worried. Providing reassurance such as hugs and encouragement helps to restore children's sense of safety and confidence. Giving children a sense of safety includes limiting their exposure to frightening situations, such as violence – whether real or on TV. Parents and carers can also play a leading role in helping children learn skills for managing their fears.

Things to take into account

- It takes time and effort for children to learn new coping skills.
- Younger children usually learn best when you do it with them.
- Though older children may be able to use coping skills independently, they still need your support when scared.
- All children feel more secure and confident when they have regular quality time with parents and carers.
- Bedtime is often when children's fears surface. Try to ensure that children have calming time before bed to unwind. A regular bedtime routine or ritual helps children feel a sense of safety and security.





Encourage helpful thinking:
 “Tell those scary thoughts
 ‘I know I am safe and I won’t let
 you scare me!’”

The following example shows some possible ways a parent or carer might help Jessica, a six-year-old child who has difficulty going to sleep because of fears that something might happen to the house.

Child’s difficulty	Some suggestions on how to support
Feels scared and worried	Acknowledge feelings: “You’re having trouble going to sleep because you’re worried something might happen.”
Unsafe	Reassure: “That storm was only on TV. It’s not going to happen here.”
Can’t think through logically	Reality check: “The wind would have to be really, really strong to blow the roof off. We don’t get those kinds of winds here.”
Feels overwhelmed by scary thoughts	Label: “That’s just a scary thought. You don’t have to keep it.”
Lacks skills for coping	Demonstrate coping skill: “Let’s blow the scary thoughts away. Take a deep breath and together we will blow them all away.” This example uses a simple idea and makes a game of blowing away all the scary thoughts. Using skills and images the child relates to, as well as making it fun, helps best.
Has trouble relaxing	Teach relaxation: Younger children often respond well to relaxation techniques that help them to visualise calming images (eg a waterfall or clouds floating gently across the sky).
Doesn’t feel confident about managing fears	Encourage helpful thinking: “Tell those scary thoughts ‘I know I am safe and I won’t let you scare me!’”
May not believe in own ability	Praise and encouragement: “You did it. You’re getting braver and braver!” or “You’re trying really hard to be brave. Good on you!”

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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