

Fears and Phobias in Preschoolers

Preschoolers are obviously more cognitively aware of their environment and thrive on routine and structure. So preschoolers will often develop fear or anxiety when faced with change – a housing move, a new daycare or school, a new sibling. Preschoolers also are developing a vivid imagination, so their fears may reflect that – “monsters” under the bed or in the closet, as well as experiencing nightmares. They may also develop a fear of animals (spiders, insects, and snakes are common), along with occasionally a fear of water (unwillingness to take baths or showers).

Your response as a parent will help your child respond appropriately to her fears and eventually overcome them. Remember to calmly identify the emotion and provide information. “The spiders can help us by trapping flies and bees in their webs.” Parents can also spend time going on an “adventure” with the child, exploring for bugs, finding where they live, how they move. More information may help your child view the insects more positively.

Don’t overreact to nightmares and monster sightings. Be careful of going on “monster hunts” to assure the child they are not hiding under the bed as the child will think of places you did not look – and you are validating the child’s fear that monsters exist. It may be better to help your child think of more pleasant things. “Let’s think about how much fun we had at the park today.”

A parent can tell (or have their child tell) an imaginary “good story” about protecting angels that hover over their beds, or about a beautiful fantasy land where everything’s a different color and animals can talk and play with them.

If your child has the opportunity, allow him to see other children experience the feared object in a positive way. Watching a peer touch or pet a dog or hold a spider may be helpful – but remember to never ridicule your child’s fear. Preschoolers may also benefit from drawing pictures of things they fear and also of items that help them feel happy.

Provide your child with a positive statement that he can recite when afraid, “I can see dogs and walk by without crying. I can be brave.”

There are also many children’s books that help children deal with their fears.