

What Frightens Our Children? What Can We do About It? **Marlene A. Bumgarner, Ed.D.¹**

I'm talking with 9 year old Alex when we switch from what he likes to do best ("hang out with my friends and skateboard or roller blade") to what concerns or frightens him. This B.C. youngster, who has also told me he likes to play alone in his "forest" and build structures out of wood scraps, now becomes somber. "I get really scared when I think someone is following me," he says. "If I'm behind my parents or grandparents at a shopping mall and this happens, I speed up and get really close to them. And I worry about being in a store that has a robber, what he would do, and what I would do." He sees a lot of "robbers and stuff," he says, on *The World's Most Amazing Videos* and knows that sometimes robbers are "perfectly ordinary looking."

Alex isn't alone in his fears. Children and parents everywhere are concerned about the increasing amount of crime and violence in their communities. And, while violence has always been part of society, it seems that more of it comes close to children than it used to. Fifty years ago, typical school problems were talking out of turn, running in the halls and chewing gum in class. Today's teachers are likely to be faced with bullying, vandalism, drug and alcohol use, weapons, and even shootings by students and strangers. And while that's where the focus is right now, children's concerns are not limited to school. Just like Alex, many children worry about unsafe neighborhoods; political conflicts on the other side of the globe, natural disasters, and even the environment. Alex, for example, thinks that adults are using "too much energy." Television, radio, and the internet have brought the world and all its troubles into the daily lives of children in ways that often leave them concerned and anxious, but powerless to do much about it.

In 1968, researchers asked school-age children to rank their fears, using a list of 80

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items. High on the list were getting poor grades, being sent to the principal, and having their parents argue (Schachter and McCauley, 1988). In a 1983 study, 80% of the children listed being killed or a family member dying, and 70% worried about their house burning down, being followed by strange people, and being kidnaped (Ollendick 1985). In 1993, 61% of 50,000 children in grades 3 to 12 rated crime and violence as the issue that most concerned them. Other top concerns were the environment (52%) and education (45%) (Scholastic Magazine Poll, 1996). While most of this research was done in the U.S., Canadian children have similar concerns (National Crime Prevention Council, 1996a; Department of Justice Canada, 1998; Statistics Canada, 1999) .

Of course, fears and anxieties differ with the age and maturity of the child. Some things are feared by nearly all children at certain ages. These include losing their security, whether it is home, family, or a pet. My mother, growing up in the north of England, was afraid of “dark places, especially down cellar, where the rats were.” There was no electricity in her childhood home, so there were lots of “dark places.” I remember being frightened of getting lost, losing my school books, my father losing his job.

One theory proposes a *hierarchy of needs*, the foundation of which consists of basic survival (food, clothing, shelter, air). Resting on survival are the safety needs, which include a secure home and family (Maslow, 1970). Until the first set of needs is satisfied, the second has little meaning. If you’re hungry or cold, it’s difficult to think about much else. Once survival needs are met, it becomes important to secure that survival – hold on to your food, stay warm. When children are warm, fed, and housed, with some assurance of maintaining that condition, they can focus on social needs (having friends, being loved and appreciated) and esteem needs (trying to earn respect, approval, and success). For children to form friendships and develop a

culturally sensitive morality – two of the developmental tasks of childhood (Havighurst, 1953) – they need to be relatively free from worrying about their safety and comfort. Assuring this, of course, is an important role played by parents, schools, and high quality out-of-school programs. (Doherty, 1998).

Historically, childhood fears haven't differed much from generation to generation, but they do differ by age (Dong, Yang, & Ollendick 1994; Ollendick, Yule, & Ollier, 1991). In other words, as children mature, what frightens them and how they react typically changes. Two year olds may be scared of being flushed down the toilet or sucked down the tub drain or being eaten by monsters in their closets or under their beds. By the age of 5 or 6 children begin to understand and fear real-life dangers, such as fire, burglaries, or natural disasters. Twelve-year olds worry about their hair, their clothes, their skin, but also about economic problems such as layoffs, homelessness, and hunger, and by now they are very aware of the potential for chaos and inequity in the world.

Fears occur and disappear as part of a child's normal development. Youngsters usually outgrow their fear of animals, loud noises, doctors, or the dark. Anxiety they develop from watching movies and TV can be explained and they can be reassured that "it's only a story." Other concerns, however, reflect reality in an uncertain world. Older children worry about being hit by a bully or an adult, or taken away in a car. They also worry that they will fail or do poorly in school, that a parent might die or move away, that their family will become homeless, that the air will become too dirty to breathe, the water too dirty to drink.

But today there is a new variable: fear and anxiety often follow television and newspaper portrayals of distant cataclysmic events, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, war, and even, sadly, violence toward children such as the bombing in Oklahoma City, the massacre in Dunblane, and

the terrible student-perpetrated shootings in Littleton and Taber. Once, terrible things happened in far-off places and only nearby youngsters felt their impact. Today, media coverage assures that everyone will know, even far-away children who cannot possibly assimilate the information and cope with it alone. Daily we are bombarded with violence and suffering. Most adults find it difficult to manage; how much more so must a child?

How can we help? When horrible things happen and are presented in living color, counsel parents to turn off the television, and keep it off in your center. Very young children should not be exposed to vivid images of disasters, and older children (and adults) should refrain from repeated viewing of frightening scenes. Convey stability and calm. Children look to us for guidance; they pick up our uncertainty and fear and respond well to our confidence. That doesn't mean pretend you're not worried or frightened, but do your best to be calm in the presence of children. We are, after all, the grown-ups.

Sometimes it helps to reassure children that people are helping – when 18-month old Jessica McClure spent 56 hours trapped in an abandoned Texas well, we explained what rescuers were doing to free her, and talked about how important it is to cover up wells so that other children would not experience the same accident. When a car smashed into a preschool near one after-school club, the children set about redesigning the fencing and the traffic pattern near the building from the way it had been depicted in the newspaper. Unknowingly, they were helping themselves work through their fear and anger at the unnecessary event (Bumgarner, 1999).

When fear and concern arise from personal experiences, such as family violence, divorce, or death, individual children may not find large group discussion to be helpful or desirable. Sometimes small groups experiencing similar problems can support one another as they deal with frightening changes in their lives or possibilities that have not yet materialized. After a

major earthquake in our California community, my five-year-old daughter found comfort and hope in *Rainbows for All Children*, an adult-led peer support program that helps children “believe in their own goodness and the value and strength of their family, whatever its form” (Yehl, 1987). Child-care professionals and teachers are trained to provide emotional support for children by listening with empathy and compassion, sharing feelings, involving them in planning and decision making, and helping them reach forgiveness and acceptance. In Nova Scotia, the YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth offers *Rainbows* at several sites and considers it an important way to “give children a brighter, clearer view of life” (www.ymcahrm.ns.ca/childfamily/rainbows.html).

In a school-site program developed to help children adjust to fear or anxiety, one-on-one playtime heads off serious problems. The Primary Intervention Program was funded in 1982 when surveys showed that 3 out of 10 children “experienced moderate to severe school-adjustment difficulties that could lead to later problems such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, or delinquent behavior” (Brock, 1998). A 1995-96 evaluation found that 84% of the participating districts showed significant decreases in acting out, shy behavior and learning problems, as well as increases in areas such as peer social skills, self-confidence and task orientation. Supporters believe this program can have an important impact on children’s long term mental health. The technique? Simply allowing children to play out their fears, one-on-one, with trained paraprofessionals.

But are special programs really necessary? Certainly if you have the opportunity to be trained in such intervention techniques, you might want to do so. But the lesson to be learned from their success is that children need “positive interactions with adults within stimulating social environments” in order to develop competence and coping skills, often called *resiliency*

(Keating & Mustard, 1996). Research has identified ways that extended families and the community (including child care workers) can help children develop resiliency (National Crime Prevention Council of Canada, 1996b). Most of all, children need to feel loved and important, and that they can talk about their fears and concerns *and be taken seriously*. Even more crucial than teaching them to address the problems directly is helping children develop trust, autonomy, and initiative, and providing them with evidence that the adults in their lives will support them and help protect them from harm.

A school-age play group or after-school program can be a good environment in which to help children handle some of their fears. Caregivers should never denigrate children's concerns. Belittling their anxieties will likely lead children to keep feelings locked up inside, not only afraid of what was originally frightening, but now also afraid of sharing the fear with others. Sometimes play activities, such as "let's pretend," can help them master specific fears – for example fear of animals or the dark. Younger children love playing *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen and Oxenburgh, 1989); older children can pretend to be marooned on a desert island or at summer camp and play out individual scenarios with their friends. In this way, children can face their fears while maintaining a boundary between fantasy and reality (Berger, 1971); these activities can also allow them to release, in an appropriate way, angers and hostilities that may have been generated by the fear (Moracco & Camilleri, 1983). Other methods for working through anxiety include painting the frightening scenario, then talking about it, and performing puppet shows with one character acting out the frightened child and another a helpful friend or adult. Also useful is helping children to develop special interests, such as sports, music, or art, and encouraging them to reach beyond their families for contact, activities, and sources of fulfillment (National Crime Prevention Council of Canada, 1996b).

Whatever role we play with children, we can help them manage their fears and anxieties by listening seriously to what they tell us, providing support and encouragement, helping them grow in ability and confidence, and showing them how life can be rich and meaningful.

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