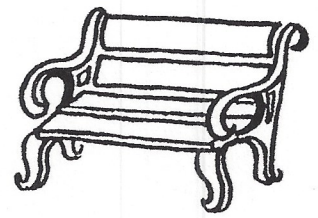


# The Park Bench School of Parenting

Years ago parents got most of their child-rearing information from each other. Articles in the Park Bench School of Parenting are written to revive that custom. If you belong to a parents' group, use the articles as discussion starters. Or ask a friend what he or she would do in a similar situation. Listen to different viewpoints and decide for yourself what's best for your family.



## Helping Your Child Deal with *Fears!*

Few things are more unsettling than finding your ordinarily bold, cheerful three year old crying at the sight of a vacuum cleaner or the sound of a buzzing housefly. Nevertheless, such fears are common in young children.

Conscientious parents sometimes worry that they've done something to contribute to fearfulness in their children. However, studies show that even with the kindest of parental support, most young children do develop some fears. What's more, some fears are typical at various ages.

Younger preschoolers, for example, often have fears related to things that they can hear or see. Unexpected sounds such as thunder may startle them, and so can unexpected movements such as the reappearance of insects in the spring. Older preschoolers, on the other hand, are more likely to be anxious about things they imagine: monsters, darkness, wild animals, or the thought of injury.

You can't banish flying insects, loud noises and night time from the world, but you can help your child find ways to deal with fear.

- ◆ Accept your child's feelings. Even though you may be afraid of different things than your child, the feeling is exactly the same. Adults don't gain courage by being ridiculed or scolded. Neither do children.
- ◆ Reassure your child that everyone is afraid at times. Children are often surprised and relieved to hear this.
- ◆ Also, let your child know that he won't always feel this particular fear.
- ◆ Find alternatives to the fear-producing circumstance until your child's anxiety has faded or

until he is a bit older and stronger. Don't force him into what, to him, is a terrifying situation. A child who is afraid of baths, for instance, can temporarily be bathed in a plastic tub.

- ◆ Help your child overcome a fear gradually, one step at a time. Whenever she actively resists, drop back a step or two and find a level at which she is comfortable. A child who is afraid of dogs could first look at pictures of dogs in books and play with toy dogs. When she is able to do that without being frightened, hold her in your arms and look at a dog out a window. Talk matter-of-factly about it. Later, you might pat a gentle dog while your child watches. Eventually, your child may be willing to walk up to a dog with you holding her hand. Don't make her pat it unless she's willing. There's no hurry.
- ◆ Don't be surprised if once a fear has faded, your child wants to spend a great deal of time in the formerly threatening situation. The child who used to be in tears at the sight of a vacuum cleaner may beg to vacuum all the rugs for you. The child who was afraid of slides at the playground, may insist on climbing to the top of the highest one. This "over-approach" is a way of coming to terms with a fear until all the mixed feelings are resolved.

While you can't eliminate fears altogether, you can help your child overcome them. Doing what you can to make your child's life as constructive and satisfying as possible will help build the inner strength needed to manage scary feelings. And in the long run, that may be the most solid help of all.