

Talking to Your Child about Scary Topics

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Sometimes our children are frightened. Maybe of imaginary things like monsters under their bed. Or maybe of things that are all-too-real that they overhear on the news, like natural disasters and school shootings. Sometimes there is something we need to talk to a child about, like "stranger danger" (aka "tricky people"), or what to do in case of an earthquake, but we worry that talking about it will make them frightened, thinking it could happen at any time.

Here are basic guidelines for how to address these topics.

Be thoughtful about what topics you bring up

We don't need to talk every day about every scary thing that could happen. Here are the circumstances in which you would have these conversations:

- When a child asks about something that scares them. (i.e. they initiate the conversation because they are worried.)
- When you need to educate child(ren) to help them to stay safe (e.g. fire drills, earthquake drills, teaching what they would do if they got lost in a crowd).

When not to talk to your child about something scary: When *you're* still processing it yourself, and you need emotional support to cope with it. Get support first, then talk to them.

Don't avoid the topic

Sometimes kids bring a topic up because they are curious and want to know more. Let them know it's OK to talk about it, and that you're glad they came to you.

Sometimes kids bring up a topic because they are feeling upset or worried. If you avoid the topic, they may perceive that as "wow, this must be really scary if my parent doesn't even want to talk about it!" If you sense they're feeling anxious, start by acknowledging their feelings. If it's something that frightens *you* too, don't pretend not to be scared. They'll sense that lie. Acknowledge your fear, then focus on other points below and how they help you feel better.

Clarify the question and their current knowledge

You can assess what they already know by starting with an open-ended question: "What have you heard about _____?" Be sure you know what they're asking, so you don't give them more information than they are ready for. Then give age appropriate short answers. You only need to share basic information, not graphic details. Then ask "does that answer your question, or is there anything else you wanted to know?"

Talk about how likely (or unlikely) this thing is to happen.

If they are frightened of an imaginary thing, acknowledge the fear (don't dismiss it), ask them more about their fear to see if you can figure out what is triggering it and address that. Reassure them that it's not possible for this thing to happen without making fun of them for believing that it could.

If they are frightened of something that is real, but highly unlikely to happen to them, you can share that. If they are frightened of something that may actually happen to them, acknowledge that while you certainly hope it won't happen, it is possible, and tell them what preparations you have made "just in case"... reassure them that there is a plan.

Talk about what we do to prevent it or to prevent it from being a big problem.

Don't promise that you can prevent things that you have no control over. But, do talk about what you do to try to prevent problems. For example, if a child is worried about a car accident, you can talk about how you drive as safely as you can and make sure they're always in their car seat. We do fire drills and stock up emergency kits so if something happened it wouldn't be as much of a problem. Daniel Tiger has episodes on making an emergency plan, making a safety kit, and how to look for the helpers: <http://pbskids.org/learn/when-something-scary-happens/>

Tell them how they would know this thing was happening.

Sometimes adults forget to tell kids this part. For example, they go through a whole earthquake drill without ever explaining what an earthquake is or how a child could tell that it was happening. Give only basic details ("the ground shakes and things might fall off shelves") without graphic or frightening images (no pictures of collapsed buildings!) – just enough information to explain when and why they want to Drop, Cover, and Hold.

Talk about what they could do if it happened, in order to make things better.

Obviously, the answer depends on what you're talking about. But here's a few key points:

- Stay calm.
- Find the grown-up helpers. (Parents, teacher, police officer, etc.) Ask for help.
- Listen to the grown-up helpers and do what they ask you to do.
- Do the things you have practiced doing. (Fire drills, etc.)

Talk about what the grown-ups would do to make it better.

Talk about community helpers: police, fire fighters, ambulance drivers, the Red Cross, people who repair electrical lines and roads and more, and community volunteers. Tell about how they help people. Again, be careful not to give graphic details about the bad stuff people need rescued from - keep the focus on the help that will be given. Point out that all these people are experts, who are well trained in how to fix all the problems.

Talk about how their parents, teachers, and other caring adults will help them to be safe. (Address the fears your child brings up... For example, if they ask about "will my dog be OK" then you answer that, but do be careful not to introduce an additional fear your child hadn't even thought of by saying "your dog might run away, but don't worry, we'll find him".)

Talk about how even if bad things happens to people, people are tough and resilient, and pull together and make it through.

There are some things your child may worry about that are really hard to talk about – like they may wonder if you, their parent, will die. You can't promise you won't. You can say you don't think it's likely to happen anytime soon. You can say what you're doing to prevent it. And you can say that if it were to happen, they would still have lots of people who love them and would take care of them. You can say "you would be very sad, but you'd figure out how to go on without me." Because they would. Human beings are resilient even in the face of great tragedy, and we want them to know that.

If your child is particularly worried about something, it can be helpful to read books that have positive stories about people who have faced that thing and have come out OK in the end. This can help to educate them with correct information about the topic, help them think through what would be done in that situation, learn about how people cope with things, and be a good lead-in to a discussion about the feelings that would come up in that situation. Find links to recommendations in my post: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/talk-to-child-about-scary-things/>