



## CHILDREN WITH FEARS AND FEARFUL CHILDREN

### Children With Fears

Fears are a natural part of children's lives, although some children experience more fears than others. Parents report a variety of children's fears at different stages of development. For example, many children are fearful of the dark, sleeping alone, thunderstorms, ghosts under the bed or in the closet, fires (especially during fire prevention week), or accidents that might happen to themselves or their family members. These common fears take place when children are exposed to something in life that they don't understand or feel they can't control. By and large, a sympathetic explanation, a light on, a door left open, and a comforting hug are sufficient to allay these fears. Although for some children these fears may be more persistent than for others, these are very normal fears that most children experience temporarily.



*“Many children are fearful of the dark ....”*

Nightmares, or what children call “bad dreams,” are the most annoying of all. They seem to emerge at different stages and rarely happen for only one night at a time. Initially, children need comfort, a drink of water, or a trip to the bathroom. A night light and sometimes even a full light can help them get back into the habit of sleeping through the night.

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### Teach Children Coping Strategies

It's not a good idea to comfort your children by having them join you in bed. Although an occasional exception for thunderstorms or a particularly bad nightmare causes absolutely no problem, sleeping in a parent's bed can become a comfortable solution for children but an uncomfortable one for parents.

If nightmares are becoming a regular pattern, be sure the child isn't watching TV within an hour and a half before bedtime. Research finds that children don't sleep as well after TV. Stars or stickers on a calendar for sleep-through nights rapidly add up to better sleep for all. However, the fears are real, so they won't disappear immediately. Be patient and persevering as your child learns to be courageous.

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## Fearful Children

Some children seem to be fearful of almost any new experience. These children require some special parenting approaches because they require preparation and support for new experiences. Giving these more inhibited children some advance expectations and a positive message of confidence can make a difference for their adjustment to new experiences.

***“Over protecting them, over talking and being fearful with them gives them more reason to feel fearful.”***

If negative and threatening approaches are used, they can be harmful. Throwing children who are fearful of water into the water will be more likely to frighten them than letting them observe and gradually permitting them to become accustomed to the water. Power struggles about their fears seem to exacerbate them. Adult talk within their hearing also makes their fears worse. Overprotecting them, over talking, and being fearful with them gives them more reason to feel fearful. Because they are fearful, giving them choices usually results in their rejecting new experiences.

Parents should be positively assertive and help children break tasks into small steps, so they'll soon become more confident as they experience successful independent adjustments.



## Underachievement Tests

- ☺ Achievement Identification Measure (AIM). Parent Report for school-age children.
- ☺ Achievement Identification Measure (AIM-TO). Teacher Report for school-age children.

## Books, Tests, CD's and DVD's to Help Parents and Teachers

### Books for Parents and Teachers

- ☺ Keys to Parenting the Gifted Child (3rd Ed.)
- ☺ Rescuing the Emotional Lives of Overweight Children
- ☺ Growing Up Too Fast: The Rimm Report on the Secret World of America's Middle Schoolers
- ☺ How Jane Won
- ☺ See Jane Win®
- ☺ How To Parent So Children Will Learn
- ☺ Raising Preschoolers
- ☺ Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades
- ☺ Parenting for Achievement (Parenting Course)
- ☺ Underachievement Syndrome: Causes and Cures—Guidebook
- ☺ Education of the Gifted & Talented (5th Ed.)

### Books for Middle Grade Students

- ☺ See Jane Win® for Girls
- ☺ Gifted Kids Have Feelings Too
- ☺ Exploring Feelings

### CD's for Parents and Teachers

- ☺ How to Parent So Children Will Learn
- ☺ Underachievement Syndrome: Causes and Cures

### DVD's for Parents and Teachers

- ☺ The Pressures Gifted Children Feel and Why They Underachieve
- ☺ The Psychological Importance of Classroom Challenge for Gifted Children's Achievement
- ☺ A United Front for Gifted Children's Achievement
- ☺ How to Respond Counterintuitively to Dependent and Dominant Gifted Underachievers

### Creativity Tests

- ☺ Group Inventory for Finding Creative Talent (GIFT) for grades K-6.
- ☺ Group Inventory for Finding Interests (GIFFI) for grades 6-12.
- ☺ Preschool and Kindergarten Interest Descriptor (PRIDE). Parent Report for ages 3-6.



## QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS ABOUT FEARS

### Sylvia Says...

*Dear Dr. Sylvia,*

*Our 4 1/2-year-old was very excited when we enrolled him in swimming lessons. Now, after the first class, he cries and refuses to go. How do we handle this?*

### Dear Safety-Conscious Parents,

Swimming, or at least understanding simple water safety, becomes more important if one lives near the water, has a swimming pool, or is planning a summer vacation near a lake or ocean. Some preschool children eventually become proficient swimmers but, for most, maintaining a healthy fear of dangerous water combined with an early introduction to playing in the water may be important for saving your son's life in a waterfront environment. It's worth explaining to your son that swimming lessons are critical for his safety.

Swimming instructors are usually well-trained to gradually accustom small children to the water. Talk to the teacher and explain your son's fear. She'll probably let him sit on the side of the pool and dangle his feet at first. She may splash him gently or let him watch the other children. If she allows you to sit with him through one or two lessons, that may be helpful. If she prefers you don't, leave him confidently and reassure him he'll be fine. Within a few weeks he'll be splashing around and smiling at you.



*Dear Dr. Sylvia,*

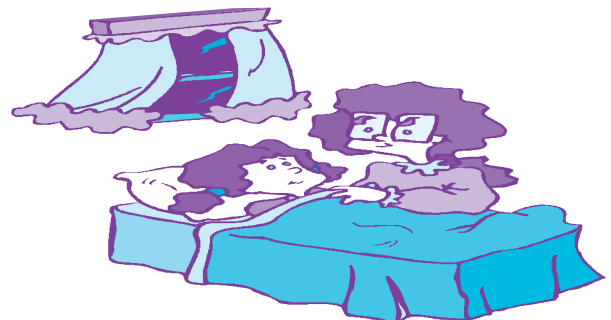
*My 10-year-old daughter is afraid to sleep in her room. She says she hears noises in the night and starts thinking about ghosts. She has now taken up residence in our living room at night. She makes her own bed on the couch and carefully puts all the bedding away each morning, seeming so we won't notice that she's not sleeping in her room. We've tried lamps, night lights, etc. She says she knows there are no ghosts in her room, but seems genuinely terrified of sleeping there. I'm really at a loss for what to do and would like to reclaim my living room.*

### Dear Mom Who's Been Vanquished From Her Living Room,

It's time for a mother-daughter brainstorming session on how to dissipate bedroom ghosts while preserving the living room for family living. Don't let your daughter trap you into trying to convince her that her bedroom is better. Insist that her bedroom is the only alternative. On the other hand, ally with her in any reasonable approach to make her feel more comfortable.

Sometimes rearrangement of furniture will cause frightening "ghost" images to disappear. Quiet music from a clock radio may help to muffle unwelcome creaks. Closing or opening a drape may either shut out an unpleasant shadow or allow some welcome light in. Reading in bed before sleep can be relaxing, providing the book is not a suspense-filled story. Consider the pre-bedtime television viewing that may be creating some visual fears, and also, give your daughter the opportunity to tell you about fears she may be experiencing.

Welcome your daughter's alternative plans other than the living room, but stay firm and positive about that room that needs to be reserved for the whole family and permits you a home base when your children are asleep.



## TEACHER TIPS\*

### How Do Children Think?

Young children's cognitive development affects their moral development. In early childhood, Kohlberg tells us that children define right by what is rewarded or punished. Later, right becomes what pleases or displeases the important "others" in their lives. They repeat what they've heard and learned. They combine and reorganize adult ideas and restate them as if the ideas were theirs in the first place. Examine the information you have about your students before you respond to their expressions of feelings. There are many possibilities for the true meanings of what they say. Listen to the words of your students and interpret them with your adult wisdom. When children communicate to you about their home and school lives, here are some possible interpretations.

#### What Children say

School is boring.

My parents love my sister (brother) more than they love me.

My parents make me work.

#### What Children May Mean

The work may be more boring or ...

The work is too easy.

The work is too hard.

The child is afraid to work hard because it may show that he's not as smart as his parents or teachers think.

That may be true or ...

The child may have been accustomed to total attention and now feels deprived.

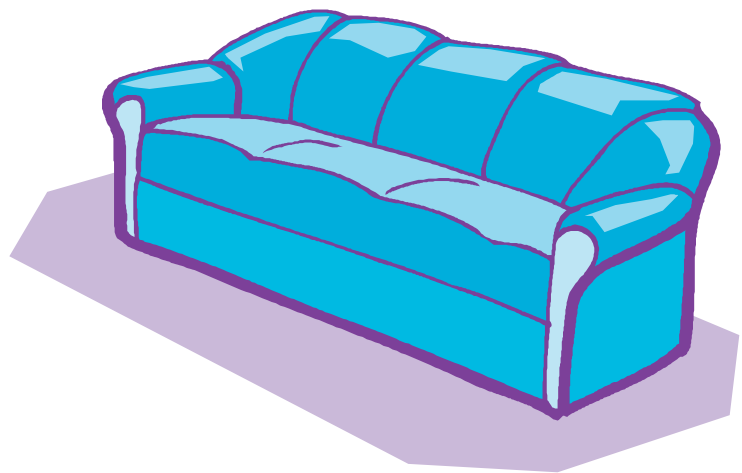
The child may have been punished recently.

The child may believe his sister can do everything better than he.

The child may have too many chores or ...

The child may be required to do one chore a day and argues about that.

The child may have rarely done chores and has been asked to do it for the first time. *(Continued next page)*



## How Do Children Think? *(Continued)*

### What Children Say

My parents don't ever buy me things.

I'm tired because I'm afraid to sleep at night.

My parents never help me with my homework.

My parents are getting a divorce.

### What Children Mean

The parents may be economically disadvantaged and may buy the child basic needs or ...

The parents may buy the child many things, but have said no to something recently.

The parents may be concerned about buying their children too many material things and may be intentionally educating them not to be so materialistic.

There are crimes and break-ins in the neighborhood, and I worry too much to get a good night's sleep or ...

I'm a fearful child and have frequent nightmares.

I used to sleep with my parents and now they insist I sleep alone.

The parents may not help even when the child has an appropriate need or ...

The parents may have helped too much regularly and are now trying to encourage independence.

The parents may have been out and couldn't help last night.

The parents may be getting a divorce or ...

The child may have overheard their parents argue for the first time.

The child's friend's parents are getting a divorce and he/she worries that his/her parents will too.



*\*From Teacher Tips, Learning Leads Q-Cards (Apple Publishing, 1990).*



## PARENT POINTERS\*

### Using Effective Referential Speaking

Referential speaking is conversation between adults about children within the hearing of those children. Children consider such talk to be truth and are likely to feel labeled by hearing it. Referential speaking can be positive or negative:

- Negative referential speaking causes children to feel powerless to change their behavior. For example:
  - References to children's fears, shyness, attention deficit disorder, sloppiness, aggression, slow speed, etc., feel like labels to children.
  - Comments between spouses about how "impossible" the children are emphasize parent powerlessness and children's powerfulness. They foster children's disrespect for their parents and cause children to feel insecure.
- Adult's descriptions of positive behaviors such as kindness, consideration, hard work, independence, effort, and perseverance are likely to encourage children to continue such favorable behaviors.
- Positive descriptions that are exaggerated such as brilliant, best, most beautiful, extraordinary, and perfect serve to please children temporarily but cause them to feel extreme pressure eventually.

Remember the words of your grandparents: "Little pitchers have big ears."



### Making Bedtime Pleasant

- ☺ Bedtime becomes less stressful for everyone if a night routine is set up for children. Our children used to call it their "ceremonies." That framework permits children to expect bedtime and avoids their making it into a nightly exercise in avoidance. If there's a reasonably regular structure, children actually respond more flexibly to exceptions.
- ☺ To establish a bedtime routine, make a list with your children of pre-bedtime tasks. For example, the list might include bath, dress in pajamas, get books ready for school next day, take clothes out for next day, etc. Ask them to tape the list to their mirror or wall. The final activities of the list might be snack, parent reading, chatting time, and quiet reading to themselves in bed. The last ones will vary with family preferences.
- ☺ Now, ask your children to follow their list and be sure that you don't nag them through it. The last activities, snacks, story time and talk are dependent on whether the first are accomplished on time. When you explain this to your children, please be positive. Don't threaten. Just say, for example, "I hope you hurry and do all the things on the list so we can have more time for reading tonight."
- ☺ Once children have completed their ceremonies, explain that they must stay in their own rooms. If they insist on calling to you every few minutes or coming out to interrupt you, warn them once that if that continues, you'll have to close and latch their door until they fall asleep. Assure them that you'll open it once they're asleep. Usually the warning is enough for them to know that you're serious, but for some children, you may want to use that latch once or twice. If they're frightened, they may leave a light on. Your intention is not to punish, but to set a definite boundary.
- ☺ Be sure to make exceptions for special occasions, weekends, or summer. Children respect fair rules better than rigid ones. However, do enforce the bedtime rules regularly for their sake and your own.

\*From *Parent Pointer, Learning Leads Q-Cards*. (Apple Publishing, 1996).



## MORE QUESTIONS FROM FAMILIES ABOUT FEARS GIRL WHO'S AFRAID OF EVERYTHING

*Dear Dr. Sylvia,*

*My 7-year-old niece is afraid of everything. When we are on the porch, she's afraid to go into the house by herself to get a sweater. She's afraid to get into the car before anyone else. Last night we were playing cards, and she was sitting in front of the couch when she said that she was afraid of the couch. My sister seems to think this is normal, but I think she must be miserable. What do you think?*

**Dear Affectionate Aunt,**

Yes, Auntie, some fears you mentioned are very normal for 7-year-olds. However, a fear of the couch isn't normal, but don't show your concerns to your niece or her miseries will expand. Instead, help her with strategies to become very "brave."

First and foremost, don't talk to your sister or other adults within your niece's hearing about her fears (referential speaking). You might, however, mention to your sister or brother-in-law, within your niece's earshot, that she seems to be "outgrowing" her fears. Be sure she doesn't hear you and her mother discussing your differences about her or her fears will take on a component of a power struggle.



If she's afraid of retrieving a sweater, you might give her a gift of a neat, new flashlight for her searches, but don't offer to get the sweater for her. Make no further mention of the issue and don't even notice that she seems cold. If she gets her sweater, you might casually mention the effectiveness of her new flashlight. As to the car, if she prefers to wait until others get in, permit her to wait without discussing or bringing any attention to the topic.

Suggest to her mother that she monitor the child's TV viewing. Even the news may cause her to be unnecessarily fearful. Certainly let her know that if she has any worries to share, you'll be happy to talk to her about them. In ensuing discussions, be sensitive, but don't over talk. Be sure to give factual information she may have honestly misunderstood or any tools (like the flashlight) with which she can independently help herself. Then reassure her that courage will come gradually but surely.

If the fears diminish, you, too, can relax. If they seem to increase even after these approaches, suggest that her mother take her for professional help. There may be some unusual underlying problems that go beyond a child's typical fears.

Columns in this newsletter are from Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids newspaper column. If the column is not in your local paper, call 310-337-7003 and speak to Margo Sugrue at Creators Syndicate.

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Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids Newspaper Column online at [www.creators.com/lifestylefeatures.html](http://www.creators.com/lifestylefeatures.html) (next, click Dr. Rimm's picture)

**Dear Dr. Sylvia,**

*Help! My 9-year-old, gifted son is very sensitive to general remarks made by teachers in the classroom. For example, "Use your best handwriting" can send him into an erasing frenzy. My son came home very upset one day because his teacher made an announcement that all permission slips needed to be turned in for an upcoming field trip. He had turned in his permission slip 2 days prior but was frantic anyway. Even more frightening, while speaking on punishment to a group of third graders, a teacher mentioned youth detention centers and jail for offenders, and my son was convinced this applied to him because he was once with a friend who had drawn on the school playground equipment.*

*Are teachers trained about the harm a broad statement can have on children who are self-motivated to always do and be their best? I've told my son that many children don't always try as hard as he does and the teacher's comments were meant for them, but he is still troubled.*



Your son needs help in becoming less sensitive. Teachers' statements like, "Use your best handwriting" and "All permission slips should be turned in" shouldn't be alarming to a 9-year-old, and it's important not to blame the teacher for your son's over-anxiousness. If your son's anxiety or perfectionism is causing him to overreact to such basic statements, I would suggest you explain to your son that you expect him to always try his best, but that he needn't ever be "the best" at anything. You can also say, "Your teacher's reminder was for the whole class. If you always do your best, that will be fine, but there are some children who require extra reminders."

While it's good for children to be motivated, it's also important for your son to understand that no one can be perfect. Perhaps if you or his dad can model how you cope with your own mistakes, it will help him. For example, you could say, "That dinner didn't turn out exactly as I had planned, but I guess it tasted pretty good anyway."

It will also help your son if you don't worry too much about his anxiety. Be very matter-of-fact about things that he's finding himself so upset about. Tell him you want to save your worrying for those things that are serious problems and it will be better if he does too. If your son does continue to be very anxious, you'll want to take him to see a psychologist for an evaluation.

**Family Achievement Clinic  
Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., Director**

Family Achievement Clinic specializes in working with capable children who are not performing to their abilities in school. Gifted children are the clinic's specialty. The clinic also offers a comprehensive range of psychological services centered on children, adolescents and their families. Services include therapy for underachievement syndrome, attention deficit disorders, anxieties, and oppositional problems, as well as parenting and marriage therapy, divorce counseling, and career planning.

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