

Your Child Now

No More

A 4-Step, No-Fail Formula for Helping Your

Fears

Child Get Over the Boogeyman and Other Scary Things

by Stephen W. Garber, Ph.D., Marianne Daniels Garber, Ph.D., and Robyn Freedman Spizman

No child wants to confront the object of his fear. All he wants is to get away from the scary situation. He doesn't realize that the more he avoids his fear, the more it's likely to grow. So, it's up to you as a parent to help your child overcome his fears.

Whatever fear you are tackling, breaking the experience into small steps will make the process more doable. After all, few things are learned in one shot. Consider tennis, ballet, gymnastics, or handwriting, for instance: First you have to learn the necessary skills, and next, you must practice them.

You can't expect a child who's afraid of dogs to hold one in her arms at first, for example. She'll probably look at pictures of dogs or perhaps watch them through a window without much trouble. After that, she'll find it easier to stand at a comfortable distance, watching you pet a small, friendly

dog. With each experience, your child will move one step closer to the ultimate goal. The success she gains along the way will motivate both of you to continue.

The fears presented here are common among kids, but any fear can be overcome by applying this positive four-step coping formula:

- 1. Overcoming Fear Through Imagination** Spark your

child's misconceptions so that she can better grasp a scary situation. Use children's books and magazines as teaching tools.

- 3. Overcoming Fear Through Observation** Provide opportunities for your child to notice how other children act naturally and fearlessly in a situation that's frightening to them.

- 4. Overcoming Fear Through Exposure** Desensitize your child to objects of his fear by providing a series of experiences that enable him to become more comfortable in the scary situation.

Your child may need just one of these steps or all four—or maybe even a few more that you create—to overcome her fear. In other words, use this formula as your framework, then tailor your approach to your child's personality and fear. If you don't find your child's particular fear among those presented here, just follow the four-step formula, creating experiences that are appropriate to each category. And remember, as your child progresses, praise her efforts.

child's imagination—by reading him relevant stories and by encouraging him to pretend—in order to reinforce positive images.

- 2. Overcoming Fear Through Information** Correct your

This article has been adapted from the book *Monsters Under the Bed and Other Childhood Fears* by Stephen W. Garber, Ph.D., Marianne Daniels Garber, Ph.D., and Robyn Friedman Spizman. Copyright © 1993 by Stephen W. Garber, Ph.D., Marianne Daniels Garber, Ph.D., and Robyn Friedman Spizman. Reprinted by permission of Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Fear of Going to Sleep

IMAGINATION

Read books to your child about children falling asleep, like *Bedtime for Frances* by Russell Hoban. *Mother, Mother, I Want Another* by Maria Polushkin. or *Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book*.

- Introduce the theme of going to sleep in doll play.
- Guide your child through an imaginary sequence in which he gets ready for bed, listens to a story, and gets tucked in. Have him imagine how he lies in bed and

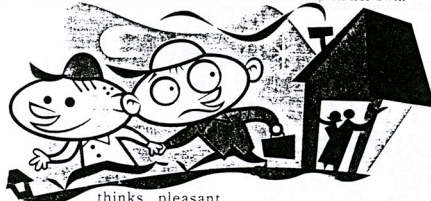
Signs of Fear

Physical reaction
(child is shaking, sweating, or experiencing shortness of breath)

Negative expectations (child assumes the worst will happen)

Avoidance
(child steers clear of/runs away from scary situation)

rings, and praise your child. Give her a kiss, and reset the timer, this time for a slightly longer period. Continue to increase the time each night, until she is able to fall asleep on her own.



thinks pleasant thoughts about his day.

INFORMATION

- Give your child some facts about sleep to ease her mind. Explain that it takes most people about 20 minutes to fall asleep and that everyone needs sleep to function well and feel good.
- Discuss the things that frighten your child, helping him to identify the ones that are make-believe and could never really hurt him. Sit with your child in his room in the dark. Use a flashlight to help identify the shapes that frighten him.

OBSERVATION

- Have your child observe a sibling or baby sleeping. Together, take a survey of what others do to help themselves fall asleep.

EXPOSURE

- Implement a bedtime routine that includes a winding-down period, quiet time for

sharing, story time, and good-night kisses.

- If your child resists being left alone, set a timer for the number of minutes she thinks she can lie in bed alone. To counteract her frightening thoughts, suggest that she read a book or listen to soft music. Return before the buzzer rings, and praise your child.

Fear of Dogs and Cats

IMAGINATION

Read heartwarming stories about dogs or cats, like *Clifford the Big Red Dog* by Norman Bridwell or *Lassie, Come Home* by Eric M. Knight. Through books, pictures, and films, you can introduce friendly animals who play with children and begin to change your child's view of the animal.

INFORMATION

- Use books to explain the behavior of dogs and cats. Talk about what a dog is communicating when he puts his ears up or wags his tail. Explain how animals play and protect themselves. The more your child knows about an animal's behavior, the more he'll be able to predict what an animal will do in various situations. This will lead to confidence.

OBSERVATION

- From the safety of a window, have your child watch you or someone else playing with an animal on a leash. Or, stay with your child for support while you both watch the pet and its owner play.
- Once she's comfortable, have your child come outside. Don't push her to go close to the animal, but designate a spot at a distance where she feels safe. Let her observe you or a sibling playing with the animal.

EXPOSURE

- Visit a pet store. Initially view the animals through the store window.

When your child is comfortable, walk into the store and hold a dog or cat, petting it so it is calm. Ask your child to select a spot where he'd like to touch the animal. For example, your child may be more comfortable if the animal is facing away from him as he lightly touches its back. Ask him to repeat this several times until he builds the confidence to lightly stroke the animal.

Fear of Sleeping Away From Home

IMAGINATION

- Read stories about spending the night away from home like *Ira Sleeps Over* by



Bernard Waber. Discuss why Ira wants to go home and how he solves his problem.

- Pretend your child is spending the night away from home. Let her pack everything she would take. Then, have her and a sibling or friend camp out in another part of the house.

INFORMATION

- Talk to your child about how long it takes to get to her friend's house. Explain that if she needs you, you can be there in less time than it takes to watch her favorite TV show, to bathe, or to eat an ice-cream cone. Set a time when she can make a goodnight phone call.

OBSERVATION

- Invite friends to spend the night so your child can observe how they handle it.
- Ask older siblings or family friends to talk about how much fun they have spending the night away.

EXPOSURE

- Begin by arranging overnight stays with grandparents or close friends with whom your child feels safe.
- Plan what your child will do if he can't fall asleep. Send along a flashlight, a book, and perhaps his favorite stuffed animal.

Fear of Thunder

IMAGINATION

- Cuddle up together while reading a story that has a stormy setting, like *Thunderstorm* by Mary Szilagyi. Discuss how the characters cope as it storms outside.
- When it is sunny, act out a story about a stormy day.

INFORMATION

- Explain to your child what



causes thunder (see "Spring Adventures," page 109).

► Plan emergency procedures, and keep a flashlight and battery-powered radio for severe storms. Your child will feel more comfortable if his family is prepared.

OBSERVATION

• When a weather alert is announced on the TV or radio, demonstrate how you listen, but don't panic.

EXPOSURE

► During a storm, distract your child with tapes, books, and games. Slowly ease yourself out of the room by taking short breaks for water until your child feels comfortable staying alone in a room while a storm rages.

Fear of Daycare or Preschool

IMAGINATION

► Read your child books about daycare and preschool, and emphasize the fact that Mom or Dad will always return later to pick her up from school.

► Set up a pretend classroom at home and let your child be your teacher. Switch roles with him, and introduce activities such as group time and snacktime.

INFORMATION

► Have your child talk to siblings, cousins, or friends about daycare or preschool.

► Answer your child's questions about school.

OBSERVATION

• Prior to his starting, take your child on a tour of the program he will enter.

• Set up a playdate with a child from her program.

EXPOSURE

► Spend time in the daycare or preschool setting with your child once the program begins. As your child becomes comfortable, wear him of your presence by staying on the sidelines.

► When your child is involved in an activity, leave the room for a few minutes by making an excuse of hav-

ing to use the rest room. Always return, as promised.

► Once your child becomes comfortable in the setting, make the parting easier by not dillydallying when it's time for you to go.

Fear of Shots and Blood

IMAGINATION

• Read books, such as *Going to the Doctor* by Fred Rogers, which deal with common medical procedures. Emphasize how the characters were apprehensive at the beginning, but overcame their fears.

Never belittle your child's fear or tease her about it. Instead, support her as she confronts it.



► Buy a toy doctor's kit that includes pretend shots and bandages. Allow your child to bandage you and give you shots first.

INFORMATION

► Use a diagram of the circulatory system to explain how the heart, veins, and arteries transport blood throughout the body.

► Point out a path of veins in her arms and explain why the blood is blue until it touches the air.

OBSERVATION

• Take your child along with you the next time you get a routine shot or have a blood test. Explain to the

nurse or doctor what you are doing beforehand.

EXPOSURE

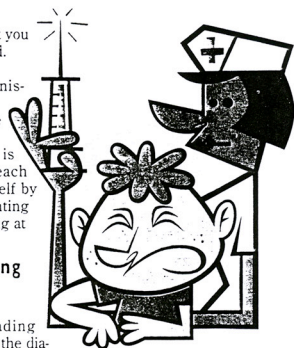
• Before she administers a shot, ask the doctor to explain the procedure.

► When your child is ready for a shot, teach her to distract herself by talking to you, counting backwards, or looking at something else.

Fear of Speaking in Public

IMAGINATION

• Take turns reading aloud and acting out the dia-



logue from stories.

► Watch live news broadcasts. Discuss how nothing bad happens when someone mispronounces a word.

INFORMATION

► Let your child know that 1 out of every 4 adults has the same fear of public speaking that she does.

► Help your child recognize and understand the physiological reactions that create butterflies in her stomach and make her feel anxious before speaking. Explain that sweaty palms, light-headedness, a pounding heart, and other physical sensations are normal reactions to this fear.

► Arrange a conference with your child's teacher if she's reluctant to share comments or ask questions in class. Let her hear from the teacher that it's important to ask questions and participate in discussions.

OBSERVATION

• Suggest that your child observe his teachers, religious leaders, or scout masters while they speak to

groups. Ask, "Do they seem nervous? Do they make mistakes? Does anyone think less of them?" Have your child ask them what they worry about. Your child is likely to be surprised that each of these people is nervous sometimes.

EXPOSURE

► Make it a practice to have each person at the dinner table share something about his day. This way your child has an opportunity to speak, without being singled out.

► Arrange many opportunities at home for your child to practice presenting his school reports before he gives them in class. ■

Psychologists Stephen W. Garber, Ph.D., and Marianne Daniels Garber, Ph.D., are director and educational consultant, respectively, at the Behavioral Institute of Atlanta. Robyn Freedman Spizman is a writer of 46 books in Atlanta.

