

WHEN THINGS GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

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I doubt there would be a child in history that has not been afraid of the dark. The most obvious reason is that at night we can't see anything so our imagination comes into play. Our thoughts are influenced strongly by stories we hear, media we see and experiences we have had. Tiny babies are not afraid of the dark, (although, naturally, they will get a fright with a sudden loud noise).

Fear of the dark will only occur when a child begins to understand what is going on around him. Many times I have said that the mind is a blank canvas. Whatever enters our senses, it splashes its color onto that canvas and cannot easily be erased. When we tell our kids spooky stories or let them see scary television, we are feeding negative images into their imagination that greatly heightens their levels of fear. Recently we were invited to attend a campfire BBQ on Halloween. There were a number of ten to fifteen-year-old kids there and one of the objects of the evening was to tell spooky stories. At the end of each story, the kids all screamed before another story began. Now, I may be slow but I just can't understand why anyone would want to frighten someone almost out of his/her wits just for fun?

When I was around 7 or 8 years old and lived in a tiny town in Tasmania, we were allowed to go to movies. When I look back, I realize how horrible these movies really were. They were aimed at kids but I vividly remember some of those scenes of adults chasing kids – the kids running away absolutely terrified. Then I think of the children's stories we were raised on. Horrid, cruel step-mothers; the witch being shoved into the oven in the Gingerbread house; the jealous queen trying to kill Snow White with a poisoned apple; mutilating mice; Little Red Riding Hood's granny being eaten by a wolf; birds being baked in a pie – alive; Humpty Dumpty and Jack tumbling down and breaking their heads. Now, don't get me started on 'Punch and Judy.' What were these storytellers thinking?

Scary images get stored in our minds and will surface the minute we can't see two feet in front of us. We need to develop caution because of the dark, but we do not need to be filling our kids' heads with spooky stuff as a form of entertainment. So what do we do when a small child is fearful of the dark?

The first thing is to recognize this fear as real to the child. Talk to them, comfort them, and explain where the noise they heard is coming from. Put a small night light in their room until they are ready to turn it off. Take them outside in the evenings so they can see the trees moving and casting shadows and they can see the little creatures scuttling around in the grass making scratch noises.

Eliminate the source of the fear by guarding their senses against scary stories and negative television. Fill their mind with positive, wholesome experiences. Ask yourself, are you an anxious, fearful or overprotective parent? A child will feed off your fears. A child will become afraid of bugs automatically if a parent reacts against them. A child will be afraid to climb trees or jump from a height if a parent is always hovering over them telling they will fall and hurt themselves.

Now let's look at the fear of separation. Before a child is two he may be upset when a parent leaves, but will soon forget and start playing. Beyond two years of age he is becoming more aware of people, places and time. He may worry that the parent is not coming back. Don't sneak off when he isn't looking. Make a point of waving him goodbye and tell him when you will be back. Stick to your word! If he is starting a new school, then it may be possible to stay at the school for an hour several days to make sure he is comfortable with his new surroundings, routine and friends.

Be aware that your child will become embarrassed if you are still accompanying him to high school!! When my grandson was 8 months old and we were staying at their home, he awoke and suddenly started screaming. His mother picked him up immediately and found he was shaking – looking like he was having a seizure. My thoughts ran through the reasons for a seizure and nothing rang true. I asked if I could hold him and spoke soothingly to him while taking him into a darkened room. I wanted to alleviate any stimulation. He settled quickly. It happened several times and usually about one hour after being asleep, and usually after a very stimulating day. Travis was diagnosed with night terrors, which I had never heard of throughout my nursing training. The answer is to wake the child about 55 minutes into a deep sleep. Make sure he is awake for a few minutes and then settle him again. Make sure you are not over-stimulating or over-tiring a child during the day. The terrors will stop.

Nightmares will occur from toddlers upwards. They have vivid dreams that make sense to them, often initiated by things they have seen or heard. Hold the child close and speak soothingly until he goes back to sleep. Eliminate the fears in the child that cause these nightmares. They may come from a stressed, tense home environment, inappropriate TV or movie watching. It may be the result of bullying, child abuse, stresses at school, or the big barking dog next door.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.