

Monsters in the closet

BY EDEN COX

Parents are vital in reducing childhood fear and anxiety. We find out how.

Child fear and anxiety is a common concern for many parents, particularly when it becomes an anxiety disorder. But the right methods of treatment have very good results.

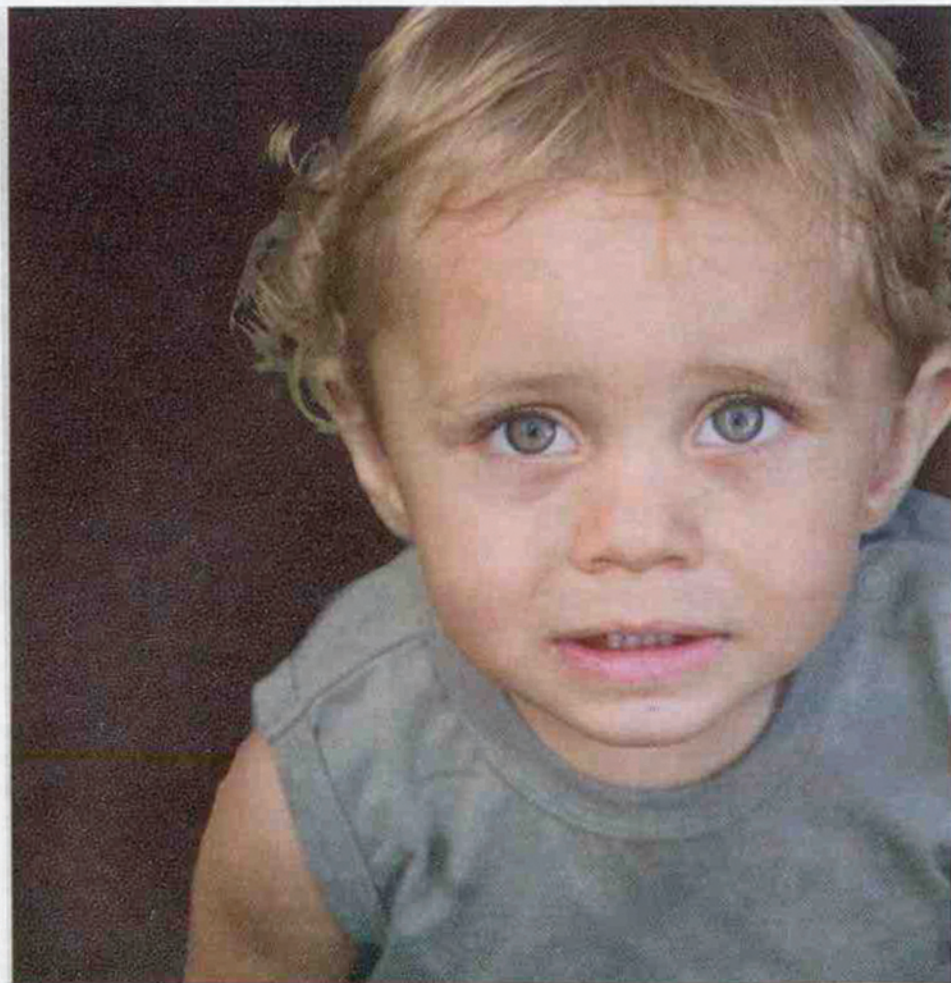
Some fears are taught to children by parents for good reason, such as being wary of strangers, and being careful around roads. But irrational or excessive fear is detrimental to children's social, physical, and mental development.

"All kids experience fears at some stage. That is normal," said Dr Simon Crisp, Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychologist at Neo Psychology. "But if the child is displaying extreme reactions and symptoms, if these are increasing in frequency and persisting over time (more than a couple of days or weeks depending on the child's age), or if the child's daily life is negatively affected, this could be a sign of anxiety disorder."

Fear reactions can range from very mild to quite severe, including quite physical responses like a thumping heart, 'jelly legs', and breathlessness. These are powerful in influencing behaviour.

If a child has a negative experience in a certain place or doing a certain activity, they may try to avoid similar activities that are enjoyable and benefit their development.

Dr Crisp said, "showing fear through facial expressions, avoiding situations (for example running away), or disguising the fear with aggression is common."



Sometimes a child may not know exactly what they are feeling scared or anxious about, and may have trouble talking about it.

But parents can look for other signs like nightmares, negative or obsessive drawings, clinginess, crying, tantrums, excessive fidgeting, insisting on maintaining a particular routine, and a preoccupation with

negative things. Dr Crisp advised that parents seek professional support to assess the reasons for these behaviours.

"It's also important to remember that a child's fear is not always about themselves, but can be about the welfare of parents or loved ones," said Dr Crisp.

Whilst child fears can be distressing,

parents can help to alleviate their child's anxiety.

"Reassure the child and help reality check the fear," said Dr Crisp. "Show the child how to use logic and reason to challenge the fear."

Parents also need to teach by example so their children learn that fear doesn't have to be restrictive.

"It's important for children to see how parents deal with fear. Parents shouldn't always hide their fears, but talk about how they are feeling and show the child how they deal with it," said Dr Crisp.

Irrational child fears need to be overcome to prevent lifelong emotional problems developing.

"Parents need to be confident and sometimes need to be quite firm in encouraging persistence with activities that cause fear. Supportively emphasise the importance of still doing the thing they fear, rather than avoiding it, and staying anxious about it. Fear can develop into a chronic condition and if a child develops a pattern of anxiety, this can worsen," said Dr Crisp.

Fears that are not attended to early on have a high likelihood of persistence into later life, with problems such as depression, poor functioning, social anxiety and agoraphobia.

There is a very good treatment rate, and methods are usually effective in a short period of time. "Treatment must include parental support and input," said Dr Crisp, "but clinical psychologists specialising in children can give professional advice."

For more information, advice sheets, programs or consultations visit www.neopsychology.com.au