

## *SPOOKED: COPING WITH CHILDREN'S FEARS*

Children often suffer from fears. When they are young, children are often scared if they are alone. Later they might be frightened about going to kindergarten or school. They might be scared of spiders, dogs or cats. Children can get frightened of the dark, frightened of noises at night - in fact, children can get frightened of almost anything, including doctors, dentists and especially injections, and then they can stay frightened for a long time.

Childhood fears are common. Sometimes they can grow into the Spooks - the kind of fears that end up running a family's life, and getting in the way of the child's healthy growing up.

### *Lucy*

Recently a mother called me about her 8 year old daughter Lucy. Lucy had always been a nervous girl, her mother said, but this had got worse and not better over the years. The previous week, Lucy had become so distressed about her mother asking her to wait at the car while she returned the supermarket trolley to the trolley collection point 20 metres away, that mother and daughter had a noisy and tearful confrontation in the carpark. In the end, Lucy had to accompany her mother to the trolley collection point. Lucy had to be with her mother wherever she went.

### *Why Children Develop Fears*

Adults as well as children can develop fears. But children tend to develop fears more quickly than adults. They also get scared of things which adults don't usually find scary. An adult might worry about losing a job. A child might worry about finding a daddy long legs spider in the loo. Adult worries are more often (not always) better linked to reality. That is, the adult would have a problem if they lost their job. The child hasn't got a problem if there is a daddy long legs spider in the loo because it can't hurt him. The child's problem is fear itself. The adults fear is often a real problem, seen in a fearful way.

### *Differences between adults and children's fears.*

- \* Adults tend to fear potentially harmful *things*.
- \* Children tend to fear *fear* itself.

### *Frightened of a Feeling*

A good example of this is *separation anxiety*. When young children go to school, they sometimes have a lot of trouble letting go of the parent at the school gate or classroom. They sometimes seem OK up until the very point when mother or father says goodbye. Then they cry and hang onto the parent, apparently inconsolable. The parent goes home feeling terrible, and then rings the school only to be told that their son or daughter is happy and smiling. The child was frightened of the *feeling of being left alone without the parent* and as soon as this feeling passed, the child is fine.

Children get swamped by strong feelings quickly. The famous psychologist Jean Piaget called this the problem of *decentering*.

### *Decentering*

Piaget drew attention to the fact that children get taken over by their feelings and cannot focus on anything else about the situation. The focus, or centre, of children's experiences can quickly become

feelings and nothing else. The other things which are always involved, and which children cannot attend to, are the parents' experiences or the reactions of others in general, or any other information about the situation, for instance, whether there is actually any danger or not.

For example, a child terrified of needles screams in terror if they are about to have a blood test even in the face of information that they are sick and have to have the test in order to get better. Children are poor at using information to help manage feelings. Adolescents and adults are much better at doing this.

The inability to decentre can be easily seen in tantrums. A scary, or angry feeling - and they are often mixed together - can take over and the child cannot do anything about it for a while. The child is often quite as much a victim of this experience as anyone else. Getting trapped by strong feelings, as most adults will realise, is a most unpleasant experience.

Decentering is a problem for children because they are not able to see things from any other point of view but their own. This skill of perspective, empathy with others and the ability to see things from other angles, including using information from others, grows with age and young children have a great deal of difficulty with it all. Adults, on the other hand, consider other points of view all the time in checking and managing their emotions, including fear.

### *Question*

Last time you were frightened, what kind of information were you able to use to help cope with the fear?

Every day in shopping centres one can see children having difficulty staying in touch with the experiences of those around them. They respond to frustration quickly, and have no understanding of their parent's experience. A child sees a lolly or a toy and wants it, instantly. It looks nice. The parent gets uncomfortable. They do not want to buy it, but neither do they want a tantrum. The child intensifies their *I want it* tactics, whatever they are, oblivious of the embarrassment or real discomfort of their parent. This common behaviour rests on the same kind of things which create fears and phobias in children - the child's strongly felt emotions and their weak capacity to consider much else.

All this means that whereas adults are open to information from outside, children are less so. They cannot think about things in the same abstract way as adults, and they are relatively closed to information about other *experiences*. When an adult says to a frightened child *don't be scared* it may be that the child has little grasp of the possibility of *not being scared* in this situation. Another adult may use the experiences of someone who is not scared to build their own courage. A child cannot do this. The child is unable to experience things from someone else's point of view. This is closed to him, and he feels on his own with the fear he has.

### *Fear Itself*

Apart from these things above, children experience fear, which is a very powerful emotion, in much the same way as adults. In the next chapter the fear mechanisms humans have are described. Children's fear mechanisms work the same way as they do in adults, but children are less able to understand fear or put up with it, as it takes over their whole experience much more easily.

You can get some idea of what fear can be like for young children by imagining doing something you find scary. Then focus only on your feeling of fear and block out all the *information* you have about the situation. How do you feel?