

SPOOKED: Getting Unspooked - The Spook Contract

Getting Unspooked is a matter of increasing the child's ability to handle scary feelings. Or, as psychologists term it - *increasing the tolerance of anxiety*. The same goal of increasing the tolerance of anxiety is behind the treatment of adult anxiety and phobia.

Adults are taught to manage fear by relaxation training for control of the fight flight reflex and good information processing for faulty thinking. The same basic methods lie behind the treatment of agoraphobia, claustrophobia, spider phobia, anxiety about conflict, death, etc etc. The adult is taught to manage the fight flight reflex by relaxation, which is the *only* way to manage the fight flight reflex, and the habits of scary thinking are challenged and altered.

The treatment of childhood fears differs from the treatment of adult in fears in a couple of important ways.

1. Children are not able to challenge scary thinking as well as adults. Children do not process information about what is going on around them as well as adults. They cannot maintain the logical, reality oriented thinking that adults can. They are more likely to be suddenly *swamped* by their feelings, including fear.
2. Children can be taught relaxation, but because of the point above, sometimes have trouble managing the scary thinking which triggers off the fight flight reflex.

The best way to treat childhood fears is by getting the adult to *model* the required way of managing fear, and to gently but firmly block avoidance of fear. Children *do* learn by imitation and modelling. This is part of the way they learn fear in the first place, and it is by far the best and easiest way to correct it. This means of course, that the parent either has to master the fear themselves or be very good at playing bluff. There are ways to help parents achieve good modelling of the management of fear. The two best ways are

1. Making sure that the way you talk to children is not conveying your fear. This means parents have got to learn to change talking Spooky to talking Unspooky. This is the best way to encourage children to use good information processing - making sure you are using it yourself.
2. Using a Spook Contract. Spook Contracts are agreements between parents and children about what to do with the fight flight problem - the awful feelings of fear. This is a very good substitute for teaching children relaxation and encourages them to learn the mastery of the fear which is driving the Spooks.

In this chapter we will have a look at Spook Contracts and how they work. In the next, we will look at talking Spooky and talking Unspooky.

The Spook Contract

There is a well used technique for adult fears called *progressive desensitisation*. This technique, which is widely used in the treatment of adult phobias, enables the adult to increase their tolerance of fears by breaking the task of tolerating the necessary fears up into small steps. So if an adult is frightened of travelling in lifts, they spend some time walking in and out of a lift which is not being used until they can stand in the lift comfortably. All the time they are using a relaxation method to maintain control of the fight flight reflex. When they feel *quite comfortable about this*, they close and open the lift doors. Then they go up one floor etc. They *progressively* unlearn the fear. It is this same principle which lies behind the Spook Contract with children.

The adult with a phobia is never required to simply put up with it, because this doesn't work. Very quickly, people get beyond the levels of discomfort that they can tolerate, and the fight flight reflex escalates into a panic attack. This is, however, exactly what we sometimes try and get children to do. Nicholas, in the last chapter, was experiencing sheer terror, and nobody puts up with sheer terror well. Nicholas needed his task, of learning to sleep in his bed comfortably, broken down in some way so it was manageable. This is exactly what a good Spook Contract aims to do.

The Spook Contract is designed to get the child interested in, and coping with, the scary feelings. It is usually not at all difficult to get children motivated to do this, as many of them are only too keen to get rid of the nasty feelings. The task is broken down to the point where the child is likely to succeed and is not given too much terror to handle at once. In fact, a good Spook Contract leaves the child with only very small amounts of fear and always a way of managing them - ways other than avoidance.

The Mild Spooks

With the Mild Spooks, a simple Spook Contract is much like a *behaviour modification* approach. The child is offered a star or sticker for staying in bed, not calling out, not calling out if the baby wakes them up etc. Simple Spook Contracts are useful if the child is not very scared but has got into some bad habits or has not learned good ones. If a child is scared of dogs, cats, being left - the parents may acknowledge the child is a bit scared and point out that they are prepared to do something the child may like if the child can tolerate the uncomfortable feeling. This can often be successful and the child masters the discomfort easily - *as long as the parent talks Unspooky*, as in the next chapter.

Managing the Mild Spooks with a simple reward system for tolerating the anxiety, if it is going to work, will work almost immediately, and the child's fears markedly decrease within three or four episodes. Parents often ask why rewards are sometimes necessary in childhood. They are most often usefully used in learning new behaviours, such as toilet training, or establishing desired habits such as sleeping in ones' own bed. The answer is that children find it impossible to step into their parents' shoes and see their behaviour as a problem. Sometimes, these behaviours are not a problem for the child at all, and there is simply no reason for them to change, unless the parents provide one.

Adults adapt to one another by talking about their points of view, and the process works because adults understand the other point of view; they are aware of the experiences of others around them. Now whereas children have some understanding of the experiences going on around them, their understanding is extremely weak in early childhood and improves slowly with age.

A child may have no problem at all in sleeping in his parents bed every night, but his parents may get distressed by this habit. Reasoning often produces minimal change in the child as he experiences very little empathy with his parents experiences, no matter how well it is put. It is not that he does not need his parents very much, he does. But he finds it hard to see past his needs into their world. Rewards wisely used help parents help the child with his limited ability to comprehend the importance of his behaviour for others.

If parents know that the child's behaviour is producing distress for them, then they offer the child something that is good for the child and themselves in a different context. A favourite reward for changes in bedtime and sleeping behaviour is the offer of a special playtime during the day if the child can keep to the goals set. Often a special box is used and a few games or activities kept in it which can only be used if the child has managed some changes which help the overall situation at night. The parent makes it clear to the child that everybody needs a good night's sleep and what the child's contribution to this family wellbeing may be. The playtime is used along with communication about how the changes

are working and new habits are often learned easily in this way.

Adults often do not like the idea of rewards. Many prefer to use reason. Depending on their age, children struggle to use information about what is happening for others in guiding their own behaviour. It is often better for both parent and child to alter the behaviours which are stressing the relationship by the wise use of reward to help the child master new behaviours which relieve the stress on everyone, including the child. The fact that adults prefer reason does not mean that children are always able to use it.

These simple methods only work with the Mild Spooks. The Bad Spooks do not respond as no reward is sufficient to counter the child's Fear. No reward or privilege will be as good as the chance to make the Awful Fear a lot smaller by climbing into mum and dad's bed or even sleeping on the floor of their room, or screaming out for them all night. The Bad Spooks only respond to a Spook Contract.

The Spook Contract

The Spook Contract is based on the understanding that the child, much like the fearful adult, has minimal control over their fears. A Spook Contract breaks the feared tasks, like going to bed, or tolerating spiders, into small, less scary tasks. This is the characteristic of a good Spook Contract - it always makes the task smaller, and the fears smaller. This decreases the likelihood of the child trying to avoid the fear altogether, and increases the likelihood that the child will master the fear in small steps.

An example of this was a bed creep Contract with a young boy of 10, who had not slept in his room at all, ever.

The Bed Creep Contract

Mike's mother and father were both fed up with their 10 year old's inability to sleep in his room. His problems were also beginning to interfere with his social life. Mike's bed was in the study next to his parents room, and he had never slept in his own room which was down the hallway next to his brother's room. His friends were beginning to ask him why his bed was in the study, and Mike was too scared to go on school camps and sleep away from mother and father. Even with his bed in the study, he often spent his nights in mum and dad's bed, or on the floor of their bedroom, or even outside their door under a blanket. His parents said they hadn't had a really good nights sleep for years.

I spoke to Mike about how scared he felt at night. Sure enough, he was very scared. He listened as I described to him the way fear affects the body and the way it can take over. I suggested to both his mother and Mike that there was very little chance of Mike being able to master the fears all at once. So maybe, seeing his bed was already out of his room, Mike may like to try moving it slowly back towards his room. Mike suggested five metres at a time and went home to measure the house! His mother was rather astounded but after eight years of problems seemed inclined to do anything, which was lucky as this was a pretty unusual Contract.

Well, Mike came back with the figures and decided that five metres was the right distance. I asked what else he needed to help with the fear. I offered him a calling out allowance. He would get a star every night he kept to the Spook Contract (and the stars counted towards something Mike really wanted), but I made it clear to both mother and son that Spooks are pretty awful and that we had to set the Contract so Mike could succeed in mastering the spooky feelings. Mike thought about this and settled on two visits a night from mum for the first week, five metres from her door. In four weeks he was 15 metres down the hall and no visits at night and in the fifth week he decided he could put up with the required amount of fear and it was too cold in the hallway. He slept in his room and has been there since.

If Mike had found the Spooks too hard to control he always had the option of going back to the previous step for a week. He never took that option up. It would not have mattered if he had, as he would have eventually mastered the fears.

Spook Contracts do begin with limits and targets *but these targets are set with the child's help* and are always set to master the fear well. The prime target is not getting the child back into their bed in any particular haste, although of course parents find this tempting, but good mastery of the Spooks.

Mike's good response to the Spook Contract is not at all unusual.

A very common part of Spook Contracts is giving the child an *allowance* of whatever it is they use to avoid the fear, such as in the above case, visits from mother. Although this is avoidance, used this way it leads on to real mastery, and is allowed only in an agreed way. To get the rewards, or the star for the night, the child must not exceed the allowance provided, but on the other hand this is set so the child is learning to succeed. As the child masters fear using a given allowance, the allowance is slowly decreased week by week, and the child's mastery of fear increases. Often the child will give up any avoidance once they learn that they can master fear, not avoid it.

The key goals in a Spook Contract are that:

1. Avoidance is minimised
2. Tolerance of fear is increased
3. Parents acknowledge the fears and helps the child with them, particularly by sticking to the Spook Contract themselves and by talking Unspooky (next chapter).

Spider Spook Contracts (Fly Spooks, Insect Spooks etc)

Spiders aren't, in the opinion of many, the most attractive of God's creatures, and they may well think the same of us. Getting a bit too close to one of the big hairy kind, usually by accident, is often the cause of spider Spooks.

Humans have a natural startle response when they find themselves too close to odd things. This is not the Spooks. A good example of the spider Spooks is that of a 13 year old girl in an English class. She saw a spider in the corner of the room, a good 8 metres away, just below the ceiling. She got up, jumped onto her neighbour's desk and leapt from desk to desk out of the room, screaming. *That* is the spider Spooks! This is not a desire for a healthy distance between us and the spider, but uncontrollable fear - a sign of the Spooks.

The spider Spooks and the fly Spooks can get rather uncomfortable for families. Going to the toilet, a favourite haunt of the daddy long legs spider (at least in our home) is fraught with tension. *Is there a spider in the loo?* Squeaks junior. Or, suddenly spotting one he runs out of the loo with pants half mast. Going to bed can be a problem, not because of fears of being alone, but fears of the spider lurking in the gloom. Some parents *acting on the child's fear* clean the room before bedtime, or have to check the loo before their child attends. Camping is a problem. The Spider Hunt becomes a part of life.

The aim of the Spook Contract is to help the child master the fear of spiders sufficiently to tolerate having spiders in the vicinity without panic. He is not required to like spiders. There are several ways of doing this.

1. The parent may offer the child a *dead spider allowance* for the week. The child can ask for a certain agreed number of spiders to be despatched by the parent and still have a reward for his efforts to master his nasty feelings at the end of the week (or day - depending on how bad the Spooks are). As the child is more and more comfortable with the dead spider allowance, it is slowly, in discussion with the child, decreased until the child may ask only occasionally for a large spider to be taken elsewhere, which would be considered within normal range. As with any Spook Contract, the rewards agreed on by parent and child must be something that the child really likes and is prepared to work for.

2. The dead spider allowance may be varied to times of the day or particular places. So the child may be offered a spider hunt at a particularly worrying time of the day, say at bedtime, a check of the loo once a day. The parents and child go on this hunt together, but the parent does not do it at any other time of the day. Again rewards are given for the child putting up with the scary feelings at other times, and again this option is chosen in discussion with the child and depending on the circumstances.

3. A final technique with slightly older children is to deliberately set up Spider Situations with the child's cooperation and time how long the child can put up with the spider in the room, at varying distances. The child should be in charge of this project and set the times and distances and size of spider. The parent and child work out rewards together. It is made clear to the child that the aim is to increase his tolerance of fears so that he can handle unplanned Spider Encounters without terror.

Parents may wonder what happens if the child decides that it is all too hard and demands the parent break the Contract. If the child and parent have discussed the way the Spook Contract is set up, and if the rewards and goals have been set between them, and still the child cannot cope, the child is always allowed to go back to an earlier level. But if they become unwilling to cooperate at all, the Contract has not been set up well enough and one of the following may have happened:

1. The goals have been set too high
2. The child's cooperation has not been gained
3. The parent cannot let go of their fears
4. Other factors are operating besides the Spooks

Professional attention is needed if parents find that the child cannot tolerate the Spook Contract.

School Spooks (The Separation Spooks)

Most parents know that staying Cool Calm and Collected when a child has separation anxiety is meant to help. But even staying Cool Calm and Collected doesn't always cure the Spooks - it depends on how badly the child has them.

Some mid to late primary age children still have the school Spooks. They cling to the parent or refuse to walk to school along well used routes. The child demands the parent walks them right to the door and is there to pick them up at the door. If the parent is not there on time the child is overcome by fear. The separation Spooks can also occur at home. One eight year old girl I saw had the separation Spooks so badly that her mother could not leave the house for any reason without her daughter panicking.

A good Spook Contract sets progressive goals which encourage mastery of the fear of separation. The parent and child discuss the nature of the fears (see next chapter) the difficulty the child has in mastering

the scary feelings and begin with a small step, say leaving the child at the school fence, not the school gate. The child is rewarded in a way agreed between parent and child for learning the necessary tolerance of this amount of fear and the steps are slowly increased.

One young girl I treated for the School Spooks arranged meeting places with her mother at various points along the route they walked until the girl was able to walk home happily with her friends. This took about four weeks. It is of course, very important that the parent keep to this Spook Contract during this learning phase, and avoid doing things such as coming to check if their child is alright, safe etc.

Sometimes the separation Spooks occur earlier, at kindergarten. This is not easy to handle by the Spook Contract method, as it is the moment of saying goodbye which causes the fears. Sometimes it is possible to stay at the kinder for 15 minutes, one week, 10 minutes the next, five minutes the week after then a goodbye and departure. However, it is my opinion that the kindergarten Spooks is better handled by talking Unspooky (next chapter) and making sure no parental modelling of fear is present.

The difference between kindergarten Spooks and school Spooks is the problem of setting steps which allow the child to increase their tolerance of fear at kindergarten. In primary school, the parent and child can pick ways of increasing the child's tolerance of leaving the parent, by saying goodbye at the gate, or the corner of the road, as opposed to the classroom door. But parents at kindergarten are required normally to walk their children right in, and the children are too young to be left at the corner of the street etc. This is one reason why treating children for kindergarten Spooks is always a bit different from treating children for primary school Spooks. The primary school child has a chance of increasing his comfort with separation *himself, by practising separation in various ways*. The kindergarten child is never as easily able to do this as it is *always the parent leaving him*. The kinder child has to develop tolerance of *being left* - a bit more difficult than tolerance of *leaving oneself*.

Whereas Spook Contracts work well with learning to leave the parent, they work less well with being left, as there is no way of breaking this experience down to increase the comfort with it. This is why handling kindergarten separation anxiety depends so heavily on *talking Unspooky* as described in the following chapter.

Getting Started

The reason parents have to help *progressively desensitise* a child is because a child cannot do this themselves. The child is fixed on avoiding the fear. The adult may try to prevent this, and this is what parents usually try to do - but then the child is left with their own inability to control the fear. For a Spook Contract to work, it is best if the child is helped to become interested and is involved in setting the targets for the overcoming not avoiding the fears. If they have a say in the steps used and the rate of progress they often do extremely well. They also like to have say in the nature of rewards, which given the effort they have to make to master fears, seems fair enough.

Often adults make the mistake of trying to get the child to handle the fears too fast as the adult can see the child *has nothing to be scared of*. But the problem is of course, that the child *is* scared, and even though this fear is not be a realistic fear. All fears feel the same whether they are about real dangers or not. As in all management of anxiety, the person with the anxiety is best to set the pace, or at least be heavily involved in these decisions. Parents often need professional help to get a Spook Contract going however, as sometimes the child needs this help to really understand that the way to feel better is not to avoid the fear, but to master it and thus make it smaller.

The Toilet Spooks

Young children sometimes get particularly scared of toilets. Speaking of modern conveniences, I have also seen young children terrified of computers, However, this is not all that common, and we shall stick to the toilet Spooks. This is usually a simple problem to solve. There is one problem with the toilet Spooks - they usually occur in very young children. The younger the child, the harder they will find it to identify and change their thinking, and often children with the toilet Spooks are too young to do this without making the task *very* simple.

The task is best broken down into smaller tasks, as in a normal Spook Contract. The child is often only 2 or 3 years old, and is not able to set a Contract with the parent.

Shaping

When children are too young to make a Contract with parents, the target behaviour, such as using the toilet without fear, can be *shaped* with the use of rewards for small, non scary steps towards the desired behaviour. This is *not* a method for toilet training, but for the child who has full sphincter control but who is afraid of the toilet. There are several variations to the way a parent shapes the child's behaviour.

Before any shaping of behaviour is attempted, have a good look at the loo. Is it dark and forbidding? Could it do with simple facelift and some pretty colours? Is the child able to reach the seat without feeling as if he is going to fall in? Are there things for him to hang on to? Is there a place to keep one of his books in the loo? Or a teddy bear?

A little bit of decorating goes a long way with young children.

These things probably won't solve the problem if the child has the Spooks, but they may make it easier for him to get over the Spooks.

To break down the going to the loo experience into smaller bits parents could try:

1. Using the Loo on my own Spooks

At first standing by the child and giving the child a prearranged reward for managing some of the apparatus himself, such as the button pressing, and explaining about the water and the size of the plumbing to avoid misconceptions. Drawings may help. Then the parent stands outside the open door, over a period of a few days, and the rewards are given as before. After the child is comfortable, the parent may stand near but not in view. By this stage the Spooks are likely to be all but over.

2. Too Scared to Use the Loo at all Spooks

The child's potty chair can be placed in or near the loo and rewards given appropriately for putting up with the feeling of being near the loo itself. *The child should start at a distance he can handle comfortably.* As the child gains the reward comfortably, he moves a few paces towards the loo. A sense of humour can help here. A slightly more enticing reward is always available for the child in his own time experimenting with using the loo. He could begin by only pressing the button, or throwing some toilet paper in. However the parent makes it clear that they need only do this, and in fact should only do it, when they feel OK about it all. He is left to make the decision when to use the loo and is simply offered the same reward for keeping on with the potty chair at a close distance from the loo, but a bigger one for experimenting with the toilet. The parent keeps a discrete eye out for the Toilet Event and when it occurs and is so pleased they ask for another demonstration of how it was done.

The People Are Looking At Me Spooks - or the Hello Spooks

Meeting new people sometimes involves a slight feeling of nervousness or extra alertness. Some children seem to develop the Spooks at this point, as if meeting others and saying hello has got too scary to handle. The child is responding to the discomfort within, as in any case of the Spooks.

The Hello Spooks can be managed the same way as any other Spooks, but there is one problem. Like the kindergarten Spooks, sometimes it is difficult for the parent to help the child break down the scary event into manageable bits. Remember with the kindergarten Spooks, the child never had the option of leaving the parent, the child is always left by the parent, and the Spooks are always more easily handled if the child has a sense of agency and power over events. The Hello Spooks *can* suffer from the same problems.

Sometimes overbearing or well meaning relatives and friends swamp the child's ability to manage their scary feelings. Grandmas and grandpas may poke fun at the child, teasing them for hiding behind mother or father. Other adults will pursue the child and insist on cuddling them or trying to make them talk. All this decreases the child's sense of power and control and is likely to increase the Spooks. As long as the behaviour of other adults can be managed, a good Spook Contract for the hello Spooks is very like any other Spook Contract. The parents and child make goals together for particular behaviours on particular outings, or for when visitors come. The child is encouraged to set goals which are comfortable for him, and encouraged to develop better control of the scary feelings inside. At first, he may be encouraged not to run off. Then the goal may become simply to try smiling at someone, or saying hello to a relatively non scary or perhaps favourite person. All this proceeds at the child's pace, and it will proceed all the faster if adults respect the child's real pace of learning.

Kinds of Rewards

Rewards sound simple enough but are not always so.

I have found working with children over the years that providing extras that matter to children can be hard. Most children are well looked after, and have comfortable lives. Often, to get sound behaviour change, some of the expected things have to be taken away and then earned back. For example, sometimes children swap their stars earned on Spook Contracts for TV time, computer time or time on activities with their parents.

Sometimes rewards are extras, such as videos once a week, or a late bedtime on the weekend. Sometimes families make up lists of things they would like to do together and when the child accumulates enough stars they can choose off the list which activity they will do on a particular weekend, or, sometimes, week night.

The decision about whether to use the normal things or the extra things usually depends on the age of the child and the severity of the problem. A general rule is that the younger the child the more likely it is that parents will have to take the normal things away and ask the child to earn them back. The older the child the less likely this will be. Older children are often quite keen to get rid of the Spooks, and extras are often suggested by the child and work very well. Sometimes adolescents get rid of the Spooks simply because, like the adult, they can't stand them. Adults affected by anxiety go through desensitisation programs with no reward - except that of feeling better.

Parents regularly make several mistakes in using rewards.

1. Always stick to what you say you are going to do. If the child has earned the start they must be given

it, and must get the reward. Never forget or be too busy to follow through. When the Spook Contract is being set up, this is when parents need to think about what they can really offer and what they cannot.

2. Never offer the child so much that you resent giving it.

3. Never take the child's stars away because of other poor behaviour.

4. Never confuse the Spook Contract with anything else. Do not use the contract to try and control any other behaviour.

5. Never use the reward as a threat. The child knows about the rewards. Do not say at bedtime, for example, *if you don't go to sleep you won't get the (whatever it is)*. This is not the point. The reward must not be used as a weapon. The child is faced with a difficult task and the reward is simply to help them along, and should not be mentioned until it is relevant.