

HELPING CHILDREN LEARN TO MANAGE FEAR

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As parents, we want our children to thrive and become everything God intends. In addition to arranging for soccer club and orchestra lessons, it is equally important to equip children with skills to manage emotions.

Children are born unable to name or manage emotions. One of the emotions children frequently feel—and feel intensely—is fear. Children experience fear because their brains identify a potential danger. However, since their brains don't think like adults, their brain may identify things like going to a birthday party as potentially dangerous.



When my children became fearful, my instinct was to declare, “You have nothing to worry about. You will be just fine.” This invalidated the child’s feelings and didn’t help them manage the feelings. It is important to help children label their emotions and identify what their brain is alerting them to. When seven-year-old Theo is fearful he will be left out at recess, his parent can validate his feeling by saying something like, “It sounds like the thought of not being chosen at recess is scary. I can see why that would be scary for you.”

It is also important to help children learn skills to manage emotions. Feelings alert children to potential danger, but they don’t say anything about the probability of the danger occurring. By asking good questions, we help children learn to “interrogate” feelings, determine the facts, and decide how they want to handle those facts. With Theo, you might inquisitively ask:

- If no one asks you to play, is there someone you could ask to play with you?
- If no one asks you to play, does that always mean no one likes you?
- If no one asks you to play, is there something you can do by yourself that would be fun?

Fear is like a powerful horse your child is riding. Inviting them to look for facts about the situation hands them a bridle to manage the fear. This is the pattern of Philippians 4:6-8. When we think about “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...excellent or praiseworthy” (verse 8), Paul’s advice in verse 6 (*do not be anxious about anything*) becomes possible.

Theo might remember that Lisa usually plays with him when he asks. He might also decide he could swing by himself if he ends up alone. From there, move back to validating statements like, “Your brain alerted you to something that might happen but, as you thought about it, you know it probably won’t happen. If it happens, it will feel bad, but you have good strategies to get through recess. I love the way you are owning your fear and planning to deal with the situation in healthy ways.” If Theo is willing, you can pray together to thank God for his friends, to ask God to help him stay focused on the good things in his day, and to remember he has a plan when his brain starts feeling fearful.

The process of teaching children to manage emotions is often painstakingly slow and tedious, but it results in children who understand what their emotions are attempting to tell them and can “bridle” those emotions

so they aren't controlling behaviors.

Want to do a deep dive? Check out Family Fire's article [Standing Firm in Faith: Facing Fear](#).

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