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Stopping your phobias from being your kid's phobias

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You can't seem to get past the shallow end of the pool. Your kids see you slide down in your seat when you ride over bridges. When it comes to family vacations, if you can drive then flying is not an option. You refuse to visit the reptile exhibit at the zoo. Do you feel like your irrational fears are hindering your child's life experience? Find out how to prevent your phobias from becoming your child's phobias.

By Elizabeth Weiss McGolerick



Whatever your irrational fear — and we all have them — you don't want to stunt your child's development by re-planting your own worry in their mind. Your little one could be the next Steve Irwin, a fighter pilot, or an Olympic swimmer... but if you're too freaked out to let them even try the things that give you the heebie-jeebies, they'll never know what they might really love.

Fears and phobias can immobilize you and prevent you from exposing your child to some amazing life experiences. The thing is, the harder you try to keep your kids away from the things that leave you breathless and shaking, the more they'll push to experience it. You may reach a point where you feel like your child is punishing you because all of the activities you try so desperately to avoid seem to enthrall them endlessly.

Children Force You to Face Your Fear

Therein lays the wisdom of children. They force you to face the things you hate most. "Children are exposure-therapy machines for anxious parents because they are often innately curious about the very things the parent has been avoiding for years," says Keith Humphreys, PhD, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine. Psychological studies have proven that irrational fears are maintained through avoidance. But it's exactly the opposite that could cure you — if you're regularly exposed to the fear that makes you anxious or break out in a sweat, over time your anxiety can be lowered when what you dread the most doesn't actually happen.

If you're about to have a panic attack because your child runs up to the made-up character with exaggerated shoes and a red nose that honks and you're coulrophobic (yep, that's the term for an abnormal fear of clowns), don't give in to your natural urge to react to your own fear. Humphreys explains, "The way to stop passing on your phobia is to react instead to the child's lack of fear."

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Helping Your Child Overcome Fears

KidsHealth.org and FamilyCorner.com list some of the following tips to aid you in guiding your children to develop the skills and confidence they need to overcome fears... whether they've "inherited" them from you or created them on their own.

- Don't belittle their fear — what your child experiences is real, even if the fear seems silly to you. Making them feel ridiculous about the monster under the bed will not make the fear go away. Talk about it — this can make the fear less powerful.
- However, don't let your child's fears guide your activities. If they are frightened by dogs, don't deliberately avoid a dog by walking in the opposite direction. This will merely reinforce their fear. Gradually expose your child to what they cower away from. There's no need to throw them in the deep end of the pool, but making your way there over time will help desensitize their fear. Baby steps.
- Help your child visualize and rate the intensity of their fear on a scale of 1 to 10. This may help them see the fear as less intense than they first imagined. Smaller children can be taught to explain how "full of fear" they are — whether "up to their knees" means kind of scared, "up to their belly" is very frightened, and "up to their eyes" means completely petrified.
- Explain things rationally to your children to stunt any misconceptions from taking root. Thunder isn't so bad once you know what causes it — explain the truth to your kids and watch their curiosity (rather than their fear) grow.

Take Your Own Medicine

Following these techniques can help you overcome your own fears as well. Remember, what you do is infinitely more important than what you say, especially for the littler children. Humphreys says, "Younger children learn primarily through modeling and imitation." When they observe your anxious behavior, they will learn from you. Knowing that your child's well-being is at stake should be enough to motivate you to conquer your own phobia.

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