

# Talking to Your Child about Scary Topics

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Sometimes our children are frightened. Maybe of imaginary things like monsters under their bed. Or maybe of things that are all-too-real that they overhear on the news, like natural disasters and school shootings. Sometimes there is something we need to talk to a child about, like "stranger danger" (aka "tricky people"), or what to do in case of an earthquake, but we worry that talking about it will make them frightened that it could happen to them at any time.

Here are basic guidelines for how to address these topics.

## **Be thoughtful about what topics you bring up**

We don't need to talk every day about every scary thing that could happen. Here are the circumstances in which you would have these conversations:

- When a child asks about something that scares them. (i.e. they initiate the conversation because they are worried.)
- When you need to educate child(ren) to help them to stay safe (e.g. fire drills, earthquake drills, teaching what they would do if they got lost in a crowd).

When you should *not* talk to your child about something scary: When you're still processing it yourself, and you need emotional support to cope with it. Get support first, then talk to them.

## **Don't avoid the topic**

Sometimes kids bring a topic up because they are curious and want to know more. Let them know it's OK to talk about it, and that you're glad they came to you. (In my post, [Better You Than YouTube](#), I share that for most "hard topics" - from sex to death to racism - it's helpful if parents are the ones to have the early conversations with children. We can talk about these topics in small bite-sized doses, appropriate to the context and our child, without overwhelming them with too much too soon. This also gives us the opportunity to share our values.)

Sometimes kids bring up a topic because they are feeling upset or worried. If you sense this, start by acknowledging their feelings. If it's something that frightens *you* too, don't pretend not to be scared. They'll sense that lie. Acknowledge your fear, then focus on other points below.

## **Clarify the question and their current knowledge**

You can assess what they already know by starting with an open-ended question: "What have you heard about \_\_\_\_\_?" Be sure you know what they're asking, so you don't give them more information than they are ready for. Then give age appropriate short answers. You only need to share basic information, not graphic details. Then ask "does that answer your question, or is there anything else you wanted to know?"

## **Talk about how likely (or unlikely) this thing is to happen.**

If they are frightened of an imaginary thing, acknowledge the fear (don't dismiss it), ask them more about their fear to see if you can figure out what is triggering it and address that. If they are frightened of something that is real, but highly unlikely to happen to them, you can share

that. If they are frightened of something that may actually happen to them, acknowledge that while you don't expect that it will happen, it is possible, and tell them what preparations you have made "just in case"... reassure them that there is a plan.

### **Talk about what we do to prevent it or to prevent it from being a big problem.**

Don't promise that you can prevent things that you have no control over. But, do talk about what you do to try to prevent problems. For example, if a child is worried about a car accident, you can talk about how you drive as safely as you can and how you make sure they're always in their car seat. Daniel Tiger has episodes on making an emergency plan, making a safety kit, and how to look for the helpers: <http://pbskids.org/learn/when-something-scary-happens/>

### **Tell them how they would know this thing was happening.**

Sometimes adults forget to tell kids this part. For example, they go through a whole earthquake drill without ever explaining what an earthquake is or how a child could tell that it was happening. Give only basic details without graphic or frightening images – just enough to explain when and why they want to Drop, Cover, and Hold.

### **Talk about what they could do if it happened, in order to make things better.**

Obviously, the answer depends on what you're talking about. But here's a few key points:

- Stay calm.
- Find the grown-up helpers. (Parents, teacher, police officer, etc.) Ask for help.
- Listen to the grown-ups and do what they ask you to do.
- Do the things you have practiced doing. (Fire drills, etc.)

### **Talk about what the grown-ups would do to make it better.**

Talk about community helpers: police, fire fighters, ambulance drivers, the Red Cross, people who repair electrical lines and roads and more, and community volunteers. Tell about how they help people. Again, be careful not to give graphic details about the bad stuff people need rescued from - keep the focus on the help that will be given. Point out that all these people are experts, who are well trained in how to fix all the problems.

Talk about how their parents, teachers, and other caring adults will help them to be safe. (Address the fears your child brings up... For example, if they ask about "will my dog be OK" then you answer that, but it's better not to introduce a fear your child hasn't brought up by saying "your dog might run away, but don't worry, we'll find him". You meant to be reassuring, but you may have just introduced another thing to worry about.)

### **Talk about how even if bad things happens to people, people are tough and resilient, and pull together and make it through.**

It can be helpful to read books that have positive stories about people who have faced any of the things your child is frightened of and have come out OK in the end. This can help to educate them with correct information about the topic, help them think through what would be done in that situation, learn about how people cope with things, and be a good lead-in to a discussion about the feelings that would come up in that situation. Find links to recommendations in my post on this topic on [www.GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://www.GoodDaysWithKids.com).