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## Validating Young Children's Feelings and Experiences of Fear

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**ABSTRACT** Children experience a wide range of emotions, from happiness and excitement to anger and disgust. When children are happy, their caregivers encourage their expression of happiness and often join in to share this emotion with them. Yet when they are angry, afraid or disgusted, often children are encouraged to suppress or change their emotions. This is particularly true of the emotion of fear. While parents and caregivers currently employ a variety of strategies to respond to fear in young children, some of these methods may be positioning children in ways that increase their fears or invalidate their feelings of fear altogether. Well-intentioned parents and caregivers may be unaware of the effect that messages such as 'there's nothing to be afraid of' or 'don't worry, you're safe with me', could have on children. This article examines a range of adult responses to children's fears and the effectiveness of these responses.

### Introduction

Fear is considered by most theorists to be one of a number of emotions that are innate or basic to the individual (Darwin, 1872; Watson, 1970; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980; McDougall in Strongman, 1987; Sroufe, 1995). While serving a role in motivating the individual to act in the face of danger (Darwin, 1872; Izard, 1991; Ledoux, 1998) and to bond with others for protection (Izard, 1977; Izard & Kobak in Garber & Dodge, 1991), fear can also have a devastating effect on individual functioning. Described as 'the most toxic of all emotions' (Izard, 1977, p. 355), fear can reduce the brain's capacity to store and process information (Darke in Hamilton & Mackie, 1993), thus limiting problem-solving ability and learning in general (Gur et al in Bodenhasen, 1993). Social interactions and interpreting others' behaviour can be less positive due to fear (Garber & Dodge, 1991).

Young children may experience a variety of fears (Ollendick, 1983). These include fear of being separated from a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1973; Gardner, 1978), fear of the unfamiliar (Harlow & Mears, 1983), fear of animals (Bowlby, 1973; Izard, 1977; Sarafino, 1986; Kindt et al, 1996) and fear of harm (Kindt et al, 1996; Eibl-Eibesfeldt in Ledoux, 1998).

Parents and caregivers (university-trained teachers, technical and further education [TAFE] trained teachers and untrained employees of the venues) are advised to accept children's fears (Izard, 1991; Izard & Kobak in Garber & Dodge, 1991) and to strive for secure attachments as children gradually work through their fears (Bowlby, 1973; Harlow & Mears, 1983; Herzog, 1996). They are advised to praise children, to model appropriate emotional responses (Harris & Saarni, 1989; Rotenberg & Eisenberg, 1997) and to avoid exaggerating the fear (Berger & Thompson, 1994). Caregivers are encouraged to provide opportunities for young children to learn about emotions through play and through teaching them to recognise and verbalise emotions (Catron & Allen, 1999). The arts are suggested as a tool for teaching emotions (Dunlop, 1984; Goleman, 1995).

This article is based on a study of children's fears and adults' responses to these fears (Sorin, 2001). It involved 45 children aged three to five years and their parents and caregivers from a range of early childhood educational services in the state of New South Wales, Australia. These services included a long day care centre, a private pre-school, a pre-school attached to a public school and a multifunctional Aboriginal children's service. The study began with surveys of parents, caregivers and children, and continued through weekly observations and ongoing informal interviews with caregivers and children.

In this research, parents were asked to describe their responses to children's fears, and all participants were asked to describe how caregivers responded to children's fears. All participants were then asked to evaluate the effectiveness of caregivers' current practices in responding to fears.

### **Responses to Children's Fears**

Both parents and caregivers described a range of techniques for responding to children's fears. These included verbal responses, such as reassurance and explanation, physical responses, such as cuddling and staying in close proximity to the child, offering the child safety, modelling non-fearful behaviour, taking the child to the feared object, and redirecting the fearful child. While well-intentioned parents and caregivers used these techniques to try to promote children's understanding of the emotion, not all of them achieved this goal. Some tended to invalidate or escalate the fear or to increase the instances in which the child was afraid. This article discusses these responses in two distinct categories: those that tended to invalidate children's fears and those that validated them.

### **Responses that Invalidate Fear**

A number of adults' responses to children's fears seemed to invalidate the fear, by minimising or not accepting it. These included both explicit and implicit

verbal messages, redirecting the child, the use of metaphors, controlling through fear and accepting some emotions but rejecting others.

*What Messages are We Sending to Children?*

Young children's ideas about emotions are still formative (Harris & Saarni, 1989), so messages can be misconstrued and fears can be escalated to unmanageable levels (Arthur et al, 1999). Through explicit or implicit messages, some verbal responses seemed to increase the child's fear or invalidate his/her feelings. For example, Sally, mother of Wade, aged five, reported her response to Wade's fears as: 'I try to tell him not to be afraid, to make him feel secure about it. I always tell him that he's safe when I'm with him'. While Sally's intention is to address Wade's fear, she is also giving him two other messages: firstly, that his fear should not be experienced and secondly, that while he is safe with her, he may not be safe when she is not there. Wade's behaviours, which included refusing to leave Sally when she was in the pre-school and staying close to her at home, seemed to indicate that he had received her unintended message and felt safe only in her company.

Adults who tell children 'there's nothing to be afraid of' may actually be invalidating their feelings; making it more difficult for them to work through the issues that lead to emotion understanding (Stein & Trabasso, 1989). For example, on a number of occasions, Matthew, aged five, expressed a fear of the family house being robbed and someone stealing the baby. In her frustration and anger with his ongoing fear, Matthew's mother responded with, 'Look, no one's gonna rob our house. It's not going to happen; you'll be all right'. Matthew's fear continued, possibly through being invalidated by his mother. Ray, father of Sophie, aged four, said he told his daughter that while it's okay to be afraid, 'there's no real need to ... it can't get you or it won't hurt you or Daddy's got hold of you'. Here Ray made the decision that Sophie should not be afraid because he was offering her safety. Instead, he could be encouraging her to construct her own understanding of the situation and of how she might face similar situations when separated from her father.

Other, more explicit messages, while intended to alert children to potential danger, may serve to instil unnecessary fear in young children. This is demonstrated in the following transcript:

*Laura [mother of Kevin, aged four]: Hopefully he's afraid of cars on the road. [To Kevin]: You can't go running out to the road, can you?  
Kevin: NO, they'll get me.  
Laura: Yeah, that's right.*

While Laura was intending to protect her child from potential harm, she may also be escalating his fear of traffic unnecessarily (Izard, 1991), as is implied in Kevin's comment about the cars: 'they'll get me.' It may have been better to talk with Kevin and encourage him to understand and assess the situation, rather than to increase his fear of traffic (Sorin, 2001).

### *Redirecting*

Redirecting children who express fear may serve as a 'stop-gap' measure, but does not actively address the fear or help children to understand it. The following scenario between caregiver Melissa and four year-old Kyle demonstrates this.

*Kyle (crying): I want mummy and daddy.*

*Melissa: Finish morning tea and we'll do some woodwork. (She got a tissue and wiped Kyle's nose. Kyle continued crying and saying that he wanted his parents)*

*Melissa: Don't cry. That's enough. You're going to choke on your food. (She talked to him about the woodwork the children are doing).*

*Kyle: I want daddy and mummy.*

*Melissa (patted Kyle's head): You'll see them at 3:00. (She stroked Kyle's back, wiped his eyes and kept reassuring him).*

*Melissa: I can see some chooks over there. If you'll eat your banana, we can go look at them.*

Kyle stopped crying and looked toward the chickens. They went to see the chickens together. (Sorin, 2001)

Melissa persevered and was eventually able to distract Kyle and redirect him to other activities. However, his separation fear persisted during the time I remained at the pre-school. Redirecting the child served as a temporary measure only, but is another form of invalidating the child's fear. Kyle was inadvertently being told to repress and internalise his fear, which as an unresolved emotion in early childhood holds potential to become a source of anxiety and conflict later in life (Santrock, 1994).

### *Metaphors*

While metaphors were both reported as a response by some adults and encouraged in the literature (Dunlop, 1984), their impact on young children is questionable. Christa, mother of Keiran (aged five) and Toby (aged three), explained to her children that thunder is 'God playing ten-pin bowling'. Rather than assisting children to process their fear of thunder, the use of metaphor with very young children whose understanding does not go beyond the literal may actually increase their fear of thunder, while also encouraging a fear of bowling and possibly of God. May's more gentle metaphor of thunder being 'clouds clapping together' may have been easier for her four year-old son, Aidan, to understand, but could still have confused him and left him fearful.

### *Control through Fear*

While fear should not be used to control a child (Izard, 1991; Berger & Thompson, 1994), it is often used in this way by adults. Karen, a caregiver and

mother, explained that Aboriginal children are taught in the home 'not to be afraid of their fear ... It's just in their culture'. She described her situation at home with her children, noting, 'I say to my kids, Gunje [an Aboriginal "hairy man" spirit] is gonna get you. He's comin' there'. While Karen justified this usage of fear as part of a cultural tradition that accepted fear, the element of controlling children through fear is unmistakable. In other cultures and families, 'Gunje' takes the form of the Bogey Man, or other characters that parents claim will 'get' the child for misbehaviour. This can serve not only as a deterrent to behaviour, but also as a great source of fear. Adults are advised against using these 'fantasy untruths' as ways of scaring young children into good behaviour (Berger & Thompson, 1994, p. 271).

### **Validating Some Emotions While Invalidating Others**

While parents and caregivers celebrate the expression of some emotions, other emotions are ignored, stifled or discouraged in young children. For example, happiness, considered by most people as a positive emotion, is an emotion encouraged in children. Caregiver Ida said of happiness:

*If a child's happy, I think everybody's happy. If a child's happy, we always maintain to keep that child happy at all times ... We might copy that child in looking at a sad child to try and bring that child around to make that child as happy. (Sorin, 2001)*

Ida was encouraging happiness, not only as a passing emotion but as a permanent state. At the same time she was invalidating the sadness another child felt by attempting to have the sad child observe and copy the happy child's emotion (Bandura in Plutchik & Kellerman, 1990). While her intentions are altruistic, she is nonetheless invalidating an emotion that she considered unacceptable for the child to experience. Other caregivers said that they would try to change sadness to happiness or reassure children that everything is okay (Sorin, 2001). Everything is *not* okay, or the child would not be experiencing the sadness, so this is another way of invalidating children's feelings.

High cognitive functioning in older children and adults is influenced by the understanding and regulating of emotions in the pre-school years (Eisenberg et al, 1997). By invalidating fear and other emotions, children are not given the opportunity to understand and deal with fear and its associated issues. They may be distracted or reassured for a brief period of time, but the feelings persist and remain unresolved and this could lead to problems later in life (Ledoux, 1998).

### **Responses that Validate Fear**

By validating fear and other emotional experiences, adults can encourage children to explore a range of emotions and to develop an understanding of them. Parents and caregivers reported validating children's fears in a number

of ways, including empathy and acknowledgement, explanation and discussion, exploration and expression, and taking action against the fear.

#### *Empathy and Acknowledgment*

Empathy, putting yourself in the child's position, is another way of validating children's fear as well as helping adults to see a situation from the child's perspective. Leona, mother of four year-old Cindy, said she empathised with Cindy's fear and told her 'It's okay to experience her emotion'. By acknowledging children's fears, adults are not only validating children's feelings, but are also positioning themselves to utilise other techniques to help them to deal with their fears. Caregiver Simone said that her response to children's fears is to 'Find out first what it is that they're afraid of, then acknowledge their fears, and try and talk them through it'. Adults who teach children to accept fear as an inevitable part of life and to not be overwhelmed by it are those who also acknowledge and accept fear that they also experience from time to time (Izard, 1991).

#### *Explanation and Discussion*

Adults who used explanation and discussion to respond to children's fears reported more success and less anger toward their children. Ann, mother of Avral (aged five), described her response to Avral's fears: 'I ask what her fears are and we sit down and talk about why she's afraid of it and I explain, well I tell her that her fears are justified or I explain why she should not be afraid of it'. However, Ann is still making the judgement for Avral as to whether her fear is justified, rather than helping to develop Avral's agency in making her own decisions. Other adults reported that they gave children the opportunity to judge fears themselves. Maggie said, 'We try to encourage the children to consider, for example, spiders as part of the natural world and that we all have our place ... while things are dangerous, so long as we're careful and take a responsible attitude'.

Through explanation and discussion, children are included in the assessment and evaluation of their fears. This helps them to take responsibility for themselves, and shows acceptance of the fear and support for the child's growing emotional understanding (Arthur et al, 1999).

#### *Exploration and Expression*

Besides explanations from adults, children can be encouraged to explore for themselves to develop a better understanding of the situation and to find suitable ways to express their fear. Renee, a parent of a pre-school child, noted that 'When a child is feeling sad because he or she has no one to play with, it may be difficult for the child to express or communicate the feeling. This is where caregivers can help by accepting the feeling and giving the child ways to

express it'. This process can be facilitated by helping children to understand more about the feared object and by offering children words and ways to express their emotions. Children can be encouraged to seek more information about the feared object or situation. Caregiver Simone stated, 'If it's a fear that was a really strong fear, like every time a thunderstorm came, I would probably work with the child and encourage them to find out more about thunderstorms ... like how does it happen – and look in books, introduce songs and all that, relevant to that fear'.

Adults can also offer the child ways of responding to the fearful situation. Kuebli (1994) urges adults to explain to children emotions that may occur in various situations as well as suggesting ways that the child can express each emotion. These could include talking about the fear, visually representing the fear through drawing, painting or sculpture, or expressing the fear through movement, music or drama.

#### *Taking Action against the Fear*

At times, taking some form of physical action is an appropriate way of addressing children's fears (Berger & Thompson, 1994). This can involve facing the feared object, or acting out the situation of confronting the feared object. Mother Hayley reported that her five year-old son, Lenny, was afraid of spiders.

*She asked him, 'Can we look at the spider together?' And if he says, 'Yep that's fine', then we go and have a look at the spider and talk about spiders and also try and say, 'We're very big in comparison to that spider and he's going to be really, really scared of us as well. And he wants to just get away from you rather than hurt you.'*

Besides giving Lenny the choice of facing his fear, Hayley has also offered him some information that will help him to understand and address his fear.

Other adults took action by turning on the lights in a dark room, or taking the child outside during a storm. Renee, mother of Adam (aged four), said that when Adam demonstrated a fear of the dark, she had 'gone back into the room with him to turn the light on and show him there's nothing there'. Rather than Renee showing Adam that nothing is there, she could look around with him and allow him to discover that there is nothing there, as a way of allowing him to take responsibility for his understanding of the situation.

### Conclusion

While both parents and caregivers report a range of approaches in responding to children's fears, not all of these approaches may be helpful in assisting children to understand and address their fears. Some may even invalidate or increase the child's fear. This is an issue of particular concern to early childhood educators as it is during the early childhood years that emotions are being shaped, and children's understanding of emotions is of critical importance to overall learning and development (Harris & Saarni, 1989). How we as educators respond to children's fear and other emotions can make a difference to how the child comes to know and understand her/himself.

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