

21390 - Dealing With a Child's Fears

the question

I have a child who is afraid of everything, even his own shadow, and I do not know whether the way I am bringing him up is wrong, or how I can teach him to be brave.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Specialists in child psychology think that in his first year a child may show signs of fear when hearing a sudden noise, or if something falls suddenly, and so on. A child may be afraid of strangers starting from the age of approximately six months, and in the second year a child may be afraid of many things such as animals, cars, slopes, water, etc.

In general, females show more fear than males, and the intensity of the fear may vary according to the intensity of the child's imagination; the more imaginative a child is, the more fearful he may be.

Several factors and reasons may increase a child's fears, such as:

- The mother scaring her child with ideas of ghosts and ghouls, or soldiers, or shadows, or 'ifreets (jinn) or strange creatures, etc.
- Too much coddling on the part of the parents, or their being too anxious and sensitive about him.
- Raising the child in isolation, keeping him within the four walls of the house.
- Telling fairy stories that have to do with jinns and 'ifreets...

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... and other reasons.

A child may be made susceptible to fear by picking up the fears of his parents through what he sees. Fears acquired in this manner are characterized by their lengthy duration. Hence, setting a good example plays a major role in training a child not to be afraid. What is required here is an example of bravery in all kinds of different situations, and not being afraid of animals that are not harmful or of people in high positions when demanding one's rights, and generally not being afraid for no reason.

In order to deal with a child's fears, the parents must pay attention to a number of matters, including:

- Bringing him up from the earliest age to believe in Allaah and worship Him, and to turn to Him in all situations of anxiety and fear.
- Giving the child some freedom and responsibilities, and letting him do things, according to his stage of development.
- Not scaring him, especially when he cries, with ideas of ghosts, hyenas, thieves, jinn and 'ifreets, etc. This comes under the heading of "better", as in the hadeeth: "The strong believer is better and is more loved by Allaah than the weak believer." (Narrated by Muslim, no. 2664).
- Encouraging him from an early age to mix with others and giving him the opportunity to meet them and get to know them, so that he will feel from the depth of his heart that he is loved and respected by everyone whom he meets and gets to know.

What the psychologists and educationalists advise is giving the child the opportunity to get to know the thing that is frightening him, so that if he is afraid of the dark, there is nothing wrong with letting him play with the light-switch, turning it off and on; if he is afraid of water there is nothing wrong with letting him play with a little water in a small bowl, and so on...

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-Parents can also tell him stories of the heroic salaf (early generations of Islam), and train him to adopt the attitudes of the Sahaabah, so that he will develop a brave and heroic nature.

But if the child's fear is a form anxiety, then its cause may be a number of interconnected factors which according to the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), should be dealt with in a wise and careful manner. These factors include:

-Giving the child more to do than he is able, as the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "He who does not show mercy to our young ones and acknowledge the rights of our old ones is not one of us." (Narrated by Abu Dawood, no. 4943; al-Tirmidhi, 1921; also narrated in Saheeh al-Jaami' by al-Albaani, 5444).

-Not satisfying his need for success. It was narrated that 'Ali (may Allaah be pleased with him) said: "I never heard the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) saying 'May my father and mother be sacrificed for you' to anyone, except Sa'd, to whom I heard him say, 'Shoot, may my father and mother be sacrificed for you!' And I think that was on the day of Uhud." (Narrated by al-Bukhaari, no. 6184; Muslim, no. 2411). This shows that parents should encourage their children no matter what the level of quality of their performance, so that they will be motivated to do even better.

-Going to extremes in physical punishment and dealing harshly with them. The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "Whoever is deprived of gentleness is deprived of all goodness." (Narrated by Muslim, no. 2292).

-Difficult living conditions which lead the parents to vent their anger on their children – such as a lack of harmony between the spouses, or the mother's work, or not being happy at work. The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "The strong man is not the one who can wrestle another to the ground, rather the strong man is the one who can control himself at times of anger." (Narrated by al-Bukhaari, no. 6116).

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Finally, we must point out that this does not mean that the child should never be afraid. Fear is necessary in some cases, because it is essential to the child's survival. He must fear Allaah, and fear the harm that people may do, and fear committing sin, etc. That should be a natural kind of fear, not too great or too small.