

FEAR

Roma Norriss explains how fear can accumulate in our children and what we can do to help release it

T

here is an insidious undercurrent that can seep, unbeknownst to us, into our children's hearts, affecting their behaviour and their confidence. It can alter their thinking and posture and shake their enjoyment of life. When our baby is constantly crying and squirming, refusing to nap more than 40 minutes a day, when our toddler won't let us out of sight, when children are picky with their food, when siblings become aggressive, when a child is clingy or passive or needs a lengthy bedtime routine to be able to fall asleep, we assume this is typical. But what do all these seemingly unrelated behaviours have in common?

Fear.

Fear can accumulate in all children. It weighs on them and causes their world and the opportunities available to them to become restricted. It prevents them from feeling relaxed enough to eat or sleep effortlessly. Fear makes a short separation from Mummy feel life-threatening. It signals such desperate alarm in challenging situations that the child can hit or bite or lose bladder control. It drives her to answer back or appear defiant. Fear creates anxiety, restlessness and rigid or compulsive behaviours. Fear causes some children to quietly retreat from things they love. The good news is that we can help our children recover from fear!

It is guaranteed for children to experience frightening situations, no matter how well we love and care for them. We don't always know when fear set in. It may have been

during a stressful time in the perinatal period. Perhaps it arose due to a separation from either parent, or when the family was under duress and the level of warm attention available was limited. Maybe it was during a scary event, like a dog bite or a startling noise. Sometimes a few minor incidents can cause fear to accumulate, and sometimes we'll never know what exactly was so frightening. It isn't important to know. What is helpful is to understand the workings of fear and how we can release it.

Babies are born wired for connection: for long hours of skin-to-skin, for their gaze to be met with contingent adult eyes, for feeling 'felt' as their brains sync with ours. Our brains are inter-relational, and it is through being attuned to an adult brain that children can feel connection. Sometimes there will be (normal) breaks in connection: when you

can't pay attention, when you are juggling six things at once, when the phone rings, or when an older child needs something. For the limbic system (the emotional brain), this will signal an 'emergency'. The emotional brain doesn't have any function for higher thought, logic or reason. The primal limbic system scans for what can be perceived as unsafe and signals this threat to the nervous system. This can be simply that your child can't feel enough of your attention and proximity in that moment. Either his behaviour will go off track, or he will release emotion through crying, laughter or a tantrum. Both are signals for connection.

Thankfully, the body has an innate recovery system for the hurts that happen. When we move in close with our warmth and availability and stop the off-track behaviour, the child's limbic system gets to regulate in the safety of our attention and offload fear or hurt that may have nothing to do with the current situation. When we cry, laugh or rage in the caring presence of a loved one, we are able to release the upset rather than store it in our body. This is the body's recovery system. Children, being very much in touch with their bodily wisdom, use all kinds of pretext to work on feelings about something bigger.

When we can't or don't know how to offer our attention to a child experiencing fear, the feelings of terror or distress generated by this 'emergency' get stashed away in the emotional 'backpack' that our child carries through life. There they lie dormant, subtly influencing our child's thinking and behaviour and waiting to be triggered when something reminds her of the initial hurt. When we carry around tension from life's hurts, it causes strain on our body and nervous system.

Unfortunately, our society generally tends to frown on emotional expression. Babies are jiggled, fed, pacified or shushed. Children are bribed, scolded, hushed, ignored, distracted or told to be brave. Often this comes with the good intention of trying to help the child feel better, perceiving that if he is crying he must be hurting. The truth is that the hurt

already happened and is registered in his body. The crying (or other emotional release) is the process of this hurt finding its way out. In children who haven't had the opportunity to regularly release emotion with our support, there may be a bit of a backlog, and it's this that drives the fear-based behaviours. Their emotional backpack has become quite full and the feelings have to pop out somewhere.

Fear can be one of the harder emotions to release. Lighter layers of fear can be dispersed through laughter, which makes physical, rough 'n' tumble play ideal. But to shed some of the scarier feelings, a child will go into a terror release, during which she will re-experience the situation in which the fear went in, and fight for herself in the safety of your attention. When children are releasing terror, they often cry wildly and tearlessly, eyes closed, getting hot and sweaty, struggling and shrieking or saying urgent, extreme things.

What can we do to help our children recover from scary events and release fear from their system?

Listening partnerships. Children take their cues from adults, and it's common for their fears to be somehow related to our own. When we can connect with another adult to work on the feelings that come up for us around a specific situation, we make ourselves more available to support our children with theirs. It can be scary work supporting a child who is in terror, especially if we have fears of our own. Our capacity to listen and remain calm and patient is directly proportional to how much listening we receive ourselves.

Rough play. Children feel safe when they can come right up against our body in play. Anything silly that will get laughter going, like sock wrestling or pillow fighting, is ideal. Laughter lifts lighter fear.

Setting kind limits around areas of rigidity. When there is fear below the surface, children can develop little quirks. You may notice small areas of rigidity that have an

urgency behind them. He must use a certain bowl, or he insists on wearing his socks this way. He has to have an audiobook playing so that he can fall asleep. When we mistake these rigidities for preferences, we buy into the compensatory behaviours that hide fear. By setting kind limits around these, such as "I think you'll do fine with the other bowl" or "We're going to go to sleep without the audiobook tonight," we give our child an opportunity to free himself from the bind of fear that constricts his power and choice. A child is likely to respond to this limit by going into emotional release.

Staylistening. When your child has big emotions, you can stay close and calmly offer your attention for the duration of the upset. You might say things like, "I'm right here." When a child goes into a terror release, it's helpful to anchor her in her current surroundings, saying things like "We're in your room, Mum is downstairs, and I'll make sure you don't get hurt." You can also hold limits around any irrational, urgent responses such as needing Mum, or a second glass of water right now! You might say, "You'll see Mum soon," or "We'll get more water in a minute." This certainty that she is OK counters the urgency and offers the safety to move through rather than shut down the feelings. If you find your child's fear has triggered your own, you won't be an effective listener, so then it's time to swap with another adult, take 5 minutes, or just soothe your child in whatever way you think will stop the release for now. You can come back to this, and you get to choose when you listen.

I hope this perspective feels exciting for the fresh potential it offers for liberation and reclamation of locked-away energy. See if you can pay attention to where feelings are tightly wound in your family and begin to gently unravel them. Always lead with the least intervention needed to allow feelings to release. What's on the other side is more playfulness, more cooperation, and exciting leaps and bounds in development and creativity. Enjoy. ●

Roma Norriss is a Hand in Hand Parenting Consultant and has worked with birth for over a decade as a doula and breastfeeding counsellor. Listening, connection, intimacy and community are what light her up. She is immensely grateful to have found this approach, which has transformed her own family. She teaches classes online and across the south of England, runs retreats on parenting, intimacy and creativity, and consults internationally. For more information on listening partnerships, check out handinhandparenting.org.