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Parents Helping Their Children Overcome Fear of the Dark

Fear of the dark is one of the most common fears experienced by children. For some kids, however, this fear can be so powerful that they do not want to go to bed at bedtime or they get up from bed over and over again, asking parents to either stay with them or help them make sure there is nothing scary in their room. For children with severe fears that keep them from going to or staying in bed, a treatment called *exposure with response prevention* can be very helpful. This means that the child is exposed to his fear of the dark but is prevented from responding the way he otherwise would to avoid his fear (like leaving the bedroom or calling out for you). Over time, your child should start to feel confident that the dark room isn't such a bad place to be alone. The following provides guidance on how to use exposure with response prevention with your child.

1. **First, identify what your child is most afraid of.** This can be being in the room alone, being in the room in the dark, being in the room in the dark alone, and so on. Write down your child's specific fears here: _____
   _____
   _____
2. **Now think about these fears in order from what is the least scary to most scary** (called a *fear hierarchy*). For example, some children might say:
   1. Being in the room in the dark with mom and dad there.
   2. Being in the room alone with the light on.
   3. Being in the room alone with the bedroom light off but the hall light on.
   4. Being in the room alone with the bedroom light and the hall light off.

   - Write down your child's fears in order from least to most scary here: _____
     _____
     _____
     _____
3. **Now think about ways to help your child learn to feel less scared with each step of the fear hierarchy.** Start with having your child do Step 1 of the fear. For the child in our example, this would be going into the bedroom in the dark with mom or dad there. For your child, Step 1 will be _____
4. **During the time that your child is doing Step 1, remind him to work on deep breathing and making positive, brave statements.** These positive statements can be things such as "I am brave"; "I am a big big boy"; and "I am safe." Your child's positive statements can be
   _____
   _____
5. **For deep breathing, remind your child of these steps.**
   - Take in a big, slow breath through your nose.
   - Feel the breath fill up your belly like a balloon.
   - Count slowly to 5 while you breathe in.
   - Slowly blow out your breath through your mouth like you are blowing out a candle.
   - Count slowly to 5 while you breathe out.
   - Repeat these steps while you are doing Step 1 of the fear hierarchy.
   - Have your child rate his fear on the Fear Scale, below.
   - Repeat Step 1 every day until your child's fear falls below a 4 on the scale.
   - Once your child's fear falls below a 4, go on to Step 2, repeating all of the above steps.

(*continued*)

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Important Points to Remember

- Most children with fears will ask you for reassurance over and over again. But providing this reassurance repeatedly will **increase** the likelihood that your child will stay afraid and think that you are needed to provide comfort.
- Instead, tell your child one time that he is safe, and then your only responses should be to encourage him to use deep breathing and repeat positive, brave statements. This will help your child start to gradually develop more confidence in battling those fears.

Even children with the worst fear of being alone in the dark can learn to feel more comfortable in a dark bedroom, which can help them fall asleep better. As your child learns to face the fear, you may also see this confidence spread to other parts of his life. A child who learns to conquer a fear of the dark can learn to conquer many other fears and worries!

