

# Fear and the Family

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Families are faced with a number of increasing challenges today. An estimated 40 million Americans suffer from some type of anxiety disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008) and childhood anxiety and depression are on the rise. In 2006, five percent of parents reported their children had some type of emotional or behavioral difficulty (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics) and obesity continues to be an ever-conscious concern, especially for children, as 17 percent of American children are found to be overweight (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics). While the economy, job loss, and the housing market crisis happening today may allude to the stifling numbers of disorders in America, child and family experts have yet another concern—*fear is creating an epidemic in American families today.*

### The Origin of Fear in Families

All of us start off with fears as children. As we move along in the life cycle, our fears transform and mold around the things and people in whom we're emotionally invested. Fear for others, or altruistic fear, is undoubtedly present in families, and for many adults, fears surrounding their children are especially significant (Warr & Ellison, 2000; Snedker, 2006). The availability of research and advice on coping with children's fears has been well established (Stearns & Haggerty, 1991), while research on the impact of fears on the family is much more limited. Yet, whichever theory you subscribe to on the acquisition of childhood fears, one component is ever-present regarding the origin and manifestation of fears throughout our lives: We do as our parents did. Studies show that our acquisition of fears and their negative influence is determined by what our parents have modeled for us (Dubi, Rapee, Emerton & Schniering, 2007). We learn how to handle fear and what to be afraid of from our family.

Parents have a tremendous amount of

power over the handling or mishandling of fear. Nancy McGarrah, a psychologist in Atlanta, states that as a parent, dealing first with your own baggage is an absolute must. "You have to deal with your own history before you can see how it can affect your parenting." Life experiences, great or small, traumatic or not, have a great impact on the origin of fears. For instance, women who've had abuse or trauma in their childhood can potentially, and likely, transfer these fears upon their children if they haven't been worked through. Other experiences, like being a victim of bullying, can alter the sensitivities and protectiveness parents develop toward their children. Depending on the type and amount of fear parents are coping with, "the impact can be huge," McGarrah says.

As individualized as our life experiences are, fear is manifesting in a systemic way in American families. While rates of violent crime and victimization in the U.S. are on the decline (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008), fears surrounding the safety of others, especially our families, are increasingly high (Warr & Ellison, 2000).

### The Impact of Fear on the Family

The impact of fear on families is a growing concern for author Richard Louv, who feels fear is isolating American families from the rest of the world, and especially from nature. In his book, *The Last Child in the Woods* (2008), he writes that, "Excessive fear can transform a person and modify behavior permanently; it can change the very structure of the brain. The same can happen to a whole culture (p. 129)." Changes to our culture as a result of avoiding fear have resulted in a movement to stay indoors. Those families living in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area in 2002 during the Beltway sniper attacks could certainly attest to fear of venturing outdoors, especially to gas stations and the parking lots of large stores. After a specific threat against children was delivered by the killers, many school groups curtailed field trips and outdoor athletic activities based upon safety concerns. At the height of the public fear, some school districts closed school for the day and extra police officers were placed in schools because of this fear.

Louv sees fear and its impact as one of the major catalysts for the deprivation of nature in children's lives, which he associates with "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses (in children and adults alike)." "As the young—and parents too—spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically," says Louv. "This damages children; it also shapes adults, families, whole communities, and the future of nature itself," he adds.

Spending time inside may leave the impression that families are consistently enjoying quality time with one another. Yet, this is misleading. "Increasingly, family members spend more time inside their particular electronic bubbles—on computers, or watching television in their own rooms," according to Louv. Not talking, not interacting, but isolated from one another and from their physical environment.

This isolation and avoidance is fueled by fear; fear of strangers, of child

abductions, of becoming another statistic, and of death. Parents want to protect their children at any cost. Yet, fear is costing the average American family life experiences and developmental enhancement necessary for personalized growth. "Fear is the most potent force that prevents parents from allowing their children the freedom they themselves enjoyed when they were young (Louv, p. 123)."

Inside, we're surrounded by media outlets that condition us to believe that the world is a scary place. Media coverage, popular movies and television shows are constantly influencing our curiosities and vulnerable emotions into believing we have reasons to be afraid. "Cable news and other outlets give unrelenting coverage to a handful of tragic child abductions, conditioning parents to believe that child-snatchers lurk behind every tree," says Louv. Yet the statistics tell us that there's simply little reason to be so avoidant.

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Child Maltreatment Report estimated that while nearly 12 in every 1,000 children were found to be a victim of abuse, neglect or maltreatment, nearly 83 percent of victims were abused by a parent acting alone or with another person. Victims abused by non-parental perpetrators accounted for 10 percent (p. 30).

In 2002, the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMA) reported that "because kidnapping prevention focuses on the danger of strangers, it may be surprising that the majority of non-family abduction victims (53 percent) are abducted by persons known to the child: 38 percent of non-family abducted children were abducted by a friend or long-term acquaintance, five percent by a neighbor, six percent by persons of authority, and four percent by a caretaker or babysitter (p. 8)." Numbers for the well-publicized "stereotypical kidnappings" in 2002 were an estimated 115. "Most children's nonfamily abduction episodes do not involve elements of the extremely alarming kind of crime that parents and

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reporters have in mind when they think about a kidnapping by a stranger (p. 11)."

The emotion involved in our fears can outweigh statistics. Unfortunately, many parents assume the worst-case scenario and immediately conjure the names and horrific tragedies of cases like Madeline McCann and Elizabeth Smart as they're developing their own mental precautionary tales for their children. "One abduction is too many," says Louv, and most would agree with him. While dangers in the world do exist, he encourages families to take a look at what they're fearful of. "The fear is real, but it's important to face the fear," he states.

Facing the fear has a great deal to do with addressing our perceptions of safety within our own communities. Studies suggest that the more you are socially integrated within your own neighborhood or community, the less fearful you are of being a victim (Adams & Serpe, 2000). However, the documentary, *Where do the Children Play?* (2007) cites that more Americans are spending less time in their own neighborhoods, isolating children from free play and implementing more structured free time. This may allude to the idea that our own backyards are dangerous places.

"Know your neighbors," say Louv. "Invest in the life of the block and the surrounding community. Create a play-watch group and ask fellow parents to sit on front stoops or porches several hours a week, available at a distance as children play." While the plan to go out and play may be appropriate for many families, "some neighborhoods are truly

dangerous, particularly in inner cities, and that reality must be addressed before full access to nearby nature is possible."

### Rethinking Our Approach to Fear in the Family

Campaigns that have been created to promote safety and peace of mind can actually increase our levels of fear, such as the "stranger danger" movement. In most cases, the perception of stranger danger exceeds the reality. Statistically speaking, our fears may be displaced. Many parents and educators still use the "stranger danger" method of teaching children safety, even though the research is telling us that we're more likely to be a victim of crime from people we know. Child abductions and sexual abuse may rank high on the parental fear list, but studies by the Center for Disease Control (1999-2005) indicate that accidental and unintentional injuries are the number one killer of kids. Spending more time talking with one another, developing your child's sense of self and confidence, and understanding and being mindful of more potential dangers, is much more effective at teaching safety, than simply avoidance of strangers.

For families who face fears as part of their daily life, victims of abuse, war and other fear causing environments, the structure of daily activities becomes increasingly important (Errante, 1997). Jason Platt, PhD, LMFT, program director of CSPP Latin American Immersion Programs in Mexico City, emphasizes the impact that societal structures have on mental health. "As clinicians, it's important to develop a greater, more globally-minded understanding." Some fears can keep us and our loved ones safe. Fear for others' safety, such as the parental fear that exists for a child, can be appropriate on many levels.

"It's a good thing to be cautious in unsafe surroundings, and to learn how to deal with risks in nature, as well," comments Louv. "But, the truth is that, while we do have a few things to fear, there is a cost to exaggerated fear, itself." If the fear overcomes us, interferes with our abilities to get things done, then it's a problem, especially when it comes to the way we're parenting our children.



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McGarrah says parents who parent with this type of fear are “doing things that don’t help child[ren] develop competence and independence,” two astoundingly important elements needed as adults.

Raising children with the sense that the world is a scary place where they must constantly rely on their parents undermines their opportunities to learn how to take care of themselves and grow into competent, successful adults. It’s also a recipe for a problematic parent-child relationship. “Some kids become rebellious to that type of parenting and present in some pretty nasty parent-child relationships,” says McGarrah. But more common are “the kids who internalize their parents’ fears and become fearful themselves,” she says.

Children exhibit their fears through changes in behavior. McGarrah describes these behavioral differences as avoidance of the feared activity, more clingy behavior with the parent, and in more serious cases, withdrawal and depression.

“The fear that parents have does produce safer worlds,” says McGarrah. “It keeps you a more vigilant parent, but you

have to be careful not to overdo it.” “It’s important to get kids’ attention about how important it is to take care of oneself,” she says.

### Coping with Fear in the Family

“Only definite reasons for hope can conquer the power of indefinite reasons for fear (Riezler, 1944, p. 489).” Studies have shown that families who are able to provide a more positive model of coping, a stable environment and a sense of security (Dubi, Rapee, Emerton & Schniering, 2007; Errante, 1997) increase the effects of resilience on their children and decrease the severity and impact of fear. Families need to communicate with one another, instill a positive sense of self and self-confidence in their children and teach safety rather than avoidance as a precaution.

When McGarrah works with fears in the families she sees, she starts off by getting people to talk about their story and their fears. She then attempts to put things into perspective with cognitive reframing, restructuring, helping the clients learn relaxation techniques, and thought-substitution. One common question she asks her clients is, “What do you have control over?”

Platt also encourages families to tell their story. “Families may develop a story that’s more problematic than what’s happened,” he says. It’s important for families to have hope and trust that their children will be okay. He adds that parents who don’t foster this sense of resilience and competence in children are actually “doing a disservice.” “Parents need to trust that children can overcome things in their life that give them fear.” ■



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