

# SOURCE LINES



## Worried Children

**W**hen I was growing up in 1950s England, one of the big worries was the threat of nuclear war. It wasn't talked about as much as it was in North America and we never had nuclear attack drills at school but it hovered in the background. I remember lying in bed one summer night and noticing flickering light on the horizon. Never having learned about "summer lightning" I came to the conclusion that it was the flashes of exploding atom bombs and I became more and more terrified.

In spite of our fears of nuclear Armageddon, the 1950s was a more confident time than the present decade, which has been labelled by many commentators as one of fear and worry. We worry about terrorism, bird flu, "super-bugs", global warming, cancer, increasing violent crime, globalisation, employment uncertainty, natural disasters, pollution, depletion of natural resources, etc., etc. (feeling better yet?). Some of these threats may be more real than others, but all our fears are fed by a media which can reach us everywhere and to which our children have ready access. In turn, our fears are often exploited by politicians and organisations with a vested interest in particular issues. The line between fear-mongering and alerting your audience to real threats that require action is blurred and very subjective.

Fears and worries are a normal part of living for both grown-ups and children. The less control we feel we have over a situation or the less we understand what's happening in our world the more we tend to be afraid. Children generally have less experience and understanding of and influence on

their world than adults. Therefore, they can be more sensitive to things that seem threatening or confusing. The younger the child the more vulnerable they can be. Young children (say under 10 years old, though it changes gradually as they grow up) also understand their worlds very differently than grown-ups do. They think *literally* or *concretely*. If they see on TV that someone has flown planes into the World Trade Center, they are very likely to worry that their mother or father's office building will be attacked. If they see reports of the tsunami in Indonesia, they may fear that the same thing will happen in Toronto.

If the threat is closer to home (Granny has just died; does that mean that Mommy and/or Daddy are next?) they may not share their worry with you because they see that you are already sad and



they don't want to upset you any more. Children are very sensitive to the emotions of those close to them so they rapidly pick up anxiety, especially in their parents. Left to themselves, they try to work out what is causing their parents' worry. Because a child's world is egocentric (meaning that he tends to explain everything in terms of himself) he will generally assume that the worry has something to do with him and his guilty feelings will make it harder to ask his parents what is going on or tell them of his fears.

So what can we do as parents? The first step is to be sensitive to our children's worries but if they don't tell us, how can we tell? Depending on

their age, children show worry in a number of indirect ways such as nightmares, difficulty going to sleep, becoming quieter, day dreaming at school, eating less, crying without obvious cause, becoming more physically "clingy", resisting or refusing going to school, playing less with their friends, etc. However, they are often easily distracted and they will probably not show these signs all the time. When we see these signs we should ask them if something is worrying them and it is very important that we accept their worries as real, however "ridiculous" or unrealistic they may seem to us. If we laugh, even in what we feel is a supportive way, they will probably think that we do not take them seriously and will be more reluctant to tell us about their fears in the future. Instead, I would suggest that you ask your child more about the fear and what he worries might happen. At that point you can honestly tell him that you understand why he might feel that way and it is then much easier for him to accept your explanation and reassurance. Of course, that doesn't mean that you can always honestly tell your child that his fears are totally unjustified. It isn't helpful to tell him that you will never die, but it is usu-

ally sufficiently reassuring to say that the immediate threat he fears is very unlikely to happen and that you don't expect to die "for a very long time".

The second thing we can do is talk to our children when something like the tsunami or a more local frightening event occurs. Ask them how they feel about it and don't assume that they haven't noticed that something bad has happened. Their fears may be more or less realistic but they will benefit from talking about them and will feel at least some reassurance. This, after all, is one of the ways that children learn about life and learn how to be parents themselves.

On that summer night fifty years ago, I finally got out of bed and told my parents that I couldn't get to sleep and asked what the flickering lights were. They didn't laugh at my fears and explained how you can see the flashes from distant thunderstorms at night. I was reassured and went back to bed and fell asleep feeling that I had learned something interesting.

Newsletter written by Dr. Michael Jeavons, M.D., F.R.C.P. (C)

## Summer & Sunscreen

from the U C Berkeley Wellness Letter, June 2005



1. Sunscreen helps only if you apply it generously and often. If you're wearing a bathing suit use at least 1 oz of sunscreen 15 minutes prior to going into the sun. A 4-ounce supply should last only one day.
2. Stay out of the sun entirely between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. If you're out, wear a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, long-sleeves, and long pants. Use a large umbrella at the beach or pool.
3. Remember that no sunscreen, no matter what the ingredients, offers total protection from the sun. A possible downside of newer and stronger sunscreens is the false sense of security they may confer on users who then think it's ok to bask and bake in the sun without risk.

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