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Subject: Overcoming Fears

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Sesame Family Newsletter

August 21, 2009

Overcoming Fears

by Elana A. Halberstadt

A mom and her son conquer fears together.

Featuring:

- Fears Come and Go
- Afraid of the Dark
- What's That Noise?
- Small Steps
- This Week on the Street...



This Week on the Street...

Even Muppets are afraid sometimes.

- [Grover and the Shadow](#)
Grover learns not to be afraid of his shadow.
- [In the Middle of Imagination](#)
Find out how Ernie deals with his fear of monsters.
- [Cookie's Nightmare Part I](#)
Find out what scares Cookie on a sleepover.

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Fears Come and Go

My almost 3-year-old son Max has fears, just like most kids his age. For a long time he was afraid of riding on the swings at the local park. For over a year, we'd periodically try the swings, but each time, Max would scream, "Get down!" Then one day, he got on a swing and wouldn't get off. The same thing happened with the slide.

Going to a new place can cause Max to feel scared, but eventually, the fear subsides. On a recent visit to a lake, for example, Max wouldn't budge from my arms at first. He watched the activity around us. Then we dug in the sand, and after a while, he ventured to the water's edge. Before we knew it, Max was running, splashing, and showing no trace of fear--he was having fun! By the end of the day, he didn't want to leave.



[Elmo Scares Julia Roberts](#)

Julia Roberts and Elmo demonstrate fear in this classic video.

Afraid of the Dark

For a while, Max was okay with going to sleep in the dark. In fact, he would be the one to turn off his nightlight and the lamp. But lately he cries, "Lights on!" at bedtime. He wants to know what every sound is (a car going by) or what that shape is in the corner (a pile of clothes).

A consistent routine of bath, books, and songs help to ease Max's transition from daytime to nighttime. Knowing what to expect and having some control (he picks the books and songs) is empowering for Max, and helps him feel less fearful.

One book Max loves is *Close Your Eyes* by Kate Banks. In this story, a little tiger doesn't want to go to sleep. His mother responds to his concerns (if he closes his eyes he can't see the sky, tree, or bird) and fears (he's afraid of the dark, of falling, and of getting lost). While reading to Max, I stop and ask questions. "Who else is afraid to close his eyes?"

Max smiles, "Max is!" He identifies with the tiger, recognizing himself in the story. I acknowledge Max's feelings, just like the mommy tiger. She stays close, and tells her baby tiger that going to sleep opens up endless possibilities in his imagination. It can be a fun adventure. I tell Max the same. I suggest that Max think of things he loves. The book's brightly colored illustrations give him an idea of what is possible and reinforce what I tell him. I ask Max, "What will you dream about tonight?"

He answers, "Trains, cars, and cats."

I encourage Max to talk. I reassure him that what he's feeling is OK and he is safe. I respond to his immediate concerns, "Mommy, I'm scared." I repeat what he said so he knows I have heard him, "I understand, Max. You are scared."

Max likes to hold something, like a stuffed animal, or better yet, me! I use the toy to help him express his feelings and get his fears out in the open.

"Is Yellow Bear afraid of the dark?"

"Yes. Max will hold him." He hugs his bear and I hug Max.



[Fear of the Dark](#)

A girl sings to cope with her fear.

[Scared Myself](#)

A boy befriends his fear of the dark.

I'll say, "Close your eyes."

"No! Eyes open."

"OK, Max. Keep your eyes WIDE open." We sing a song together and in moments, he is fast asleep.

What's That Noise?

One evening a few months ago, it suddenly began to rain very hard. Max screamed, "Mommy, what's that noise?"

I replied, "That's the rain landing on the air conditioner."

"I don't like it! He ran to me.

I hugged him and lifted him to the window to see outside. I asked, "What do you see? What do you hear?"

"Water... and... and... it's noisy!" He held on tight.

"Yes, the rain is noisy!" Then I asked, "What else is scaring you?"

Max replied, "The rain is going to come inside."

"You are safe." I showed him that the walls and ceiling were dry. I asked, "Do you see rain inside?"

"No." He relaxed.

Later that night, it happened again... the loud rain scared Max. So, I repeated what had worked earlier - showing him how we were dry and safe in our home. A week later, it happened AGAIN -- the rain scared Max. This time, I demonstrated how water sounds on a metal pot at the kitchen sink. I told him it sounded a bit like music to me and I let him try to make some "water music." I showed Max the raindrops bouncing up and down outside and suggested we pretend we are raindrops and bounce up and down, too. He laughed and jumped with me, "Boing, boing, boing!" Then one rainy day, weeks later, he went over to the window and declared, "That's rain making noise on the air conditioner. It's OK."

Distraction is another great strategy. I admit that lightning and thunder makes me uneasy, too. So when a thunderstorm is underway, Max and I find ways to ignore it. We snuggle and play our "Cat Cave" game under a blanket. We imagine we are on a train, car, bus, or plane and choose fun destinations (visits to favorite places like Grandpa's house). We take turns making up stories. When the noise of thunder is very loud, we use it in our story, and it becomes nature's soundtrack to our fun escape.

Small Steps

After Max was born, I developed a fear of driving. I learned that I wasn't alone. I met other parents who had been driving for years like me, who suddenly developed this fear after their children were born. And like me, they hated how this fear limited them. We wished we had the courage to drive again, and some of us felt ashamed for feeling afraid. Admitting my fear and talking about it was the first step in overcoming it.

My motivation to drive again was getting to and from Max's nursery school. Once winter set in, the long walk became difficult. It was time to conquer my fear.

I decided to apply the same strategies I use to help Max conquer his fears. I broke the process into small steps. I sat in the driver's seat. I practiced using the dashboard controls. Then I brought Max with me. His interest in the car made it fun. We sat in our parked car and he said, "When Max is older, Max can drive." His enthusiasm was infectious.



I Tried

A song about trying new things.

Weeks later, I drove. Max was my backseat champion. He said, "Mommy can drive!" He quoted from *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper, "I think I can." Then his own variation, "I think you can."

When I drive in the rain, we chant, "We think we can!" Together, we face our fears one step, one turn, one night at a time.

Elana A. Halberstadt
Sesame Workshop

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