

# **A Child Is Fearful of the Home Situation**

## **Introduction**

Brent frantically moved around the small living room trying to find a toy or something he could use to distract his little sister, Brenda. Brenda was 3 and Brent was 7. She had been crying for what seemed to Brent like a long, long time. Despite all his efforts, he could not console her. Tears welled up in his eyes as feelings of fear and distress overwhelmed him. They had been left by their single mother for yet another lonesome, endless night. The rain beat and blew against the windows. The occasional clap of thunder only worsened Brenda's crying. Brent knew he was the one who had to take care of his sister, but he didn't know how. He was afraid he would fail. He didn't know how to feed her. He didn't know how to keep her clean and safe. He didn't know how to comfort her. He didn't know what to do. He didn't even know what time it was. Was it their bedtime? He tried to keep her from getting into things he thought might hurt her. He was afraid for her; he was afraid for himself. He patted her so she would stop crying. Finally he was successful, and she went to sleep. He curled up on the couch next to her and began quietly crying. He longed for morning and daylight, but worried about being at school all day away from Brenda. He feared that tomorrow night would be like tonight. As he nodded off to sleep, his mother's words returned to him. "Be a good boy and take good care of your sister. Remember you're momma's little man."

Every safety model contains a threat concerned with a child's fear of his or her home, the home situation, or people who frequent the home. This acknowledges

that a child's fear is an important indicator of the danger or perceived danger a child faces day in and day out.

This safety threat is not complicated; it is not difficult to understand and recognize. There are only a few qualifications which you should be aware of and concerned about.

### **A Child's Fear**

The distinction in this threat of danger is concerned with the quality of the child's fear. First let's talk about what this does not include:

- This does not include normal childhood fears typically associated with age and fantasy such as fear of the dark, monsters, snakes, or what's under the bed.
- This does not include anxiety and dread related to doctor visits, vaccinations, failing at a task or physical challenge, or difficulty with peers.
- This does not include life adjustment and development fears such as changes in the family, divorce, loss or anticipated loss of a loved one, beginning or changing schools, or family relocation.

The point here is that children experience all kinds of emotions that exist within a continuum from emotional discomfort to dread to anxiety. What a child is facing in his daily life and how he is adapting must be understood within the context of (1) his environment and (2) his development. Some amount of anxiety or worry is a natural part of growing up.

A child's fear which is indicative of a threat of danger is different.

*The fear is extreme.*

The kind of fear that results from threatening events, people and family life is unusual and notable. Here is where you take notice that a child's fear associated with danger in the home is different from other forms of child worry: anxiety, dread, apprehension, and so on. This kind of fear is intense and generalized throughout the child's functioning and reasonably can be associated with the child's daily experience and home environment.

*The fear is learned.*

Children who are afraid of their caregivers, the home, or people who frequent the home do not wake up on a particular day being fearful. This is a learned response. A child who is in fear of his safety has experienced and continues to experience a lifestyle, specific events, a home climate, and/or threatening people that heighten his awareness of his vulnerability and result in him concluding that he is in danger.

*The fear is reality based, not fantasy.*

Here we are concerned with children who are in fear of their safety because they see, hear, feel and experience realities within their life and home that they conclude could cause them pain and suffering. You see...this is different than a monster under a bed. Whether a child can explain or describe what causes her fear must be understood as associated with age and capacity. Nevertheless, the experiences and conclusions that result in the fear are based on real things happening in the child's life that are felt and worried about.

*The fear is preoccupying.*

What is going on in the family is a distraction to the child. It is hard for the child to consider or think about anything else. The child's fear may be debilitating in the sense of being able to concentrate on anything else for any sustained period. The fear-filled emotion is pervasive in the child's daily experience. The child likely feels overwhelming vulnerability and powerlessness in relation to the perceived threat and danger. The child's fear influences behavior so that he or she may be alert to danger; may avoid others and social experiences; may withdraw from activities; may exhibit nail biting, bedwetting or other similar kinds of behavior.

### **The Causes of a Child's Fear**

We have emphasized that a child's fear for his safety is reality based and exists within his experience with caregivers and in the home. The reality and experience that produces such fear as an indicator of threat of danger may be associated with individuals, the home environment, events or the nature and quality of care received by the child. What is important to understand is that regardless of the cause, the fear the child experiences is associated with his own sense of dependence, vulnerability and powerlessness to protect himself.

So here are some causes of a child's fear: physical assaults; violence within the home; bizarre, inappropriate or unregulated/uninhibited adult behavior (including sexual behavior); dangerous physical and social home environment; extreme verbal assaults; psychological terrorism; extreme social isolation; extreme deprivation; any form of torture; being left alone, unsupervised and unprotected for long periods of time; totally unrealistic expectations for a child to care for himself, for smaller siblings, or for the home. (Here we consider caregivers who've vacated their caregiving and adult responsibilities so that a child is forced to assume responsibilities beyond his or her capacity.)

## **Definition and Elaboration**

A child is fearful of the home situation. This refers to fear that is in response to actual and realistic dangers. This is not anxiety. Being afraid is directly related to the danger the child senses as ever present whether predictable (that the child knows what and when to expect) or unpredictable (that the child knows what but doesn't know when to expect). The child's fearfulness is apparent in what he says, his overall behavior, his physical responses, and his emotional state.

"The home situation" refers to the child's daily living environment which includes the physical setting, the climate or atmosphere of the home, specific family members, others who may frequent the home and/or other conditions in the living situation (e.g., chaos, crack house, violent neighborhood, and so forth).

## **Application of the Safety Threshold Criteria**

Do you know when fear is out of control? Have you ever felt that way? Can you imagine a child being so afraid that his fear is out of control? Can you imagine a family situation in which there is nothing or no one within the family that will allay the child's fear and assure a sense of security? To meet this criterion, the child's fear must be obvious, extreme, and related to some perceived danger that the child feels or experiences.

By trusting the level of fear that is consistent with the safety threat, it is reasonable to believe that the child's emotion is well-founded in something that is occurring in the home that is extreme with respect to terrorizing the child. It is reasonable to believe that the source of the child's fear could result in severe effects.

Whatever is causing the child's fear is active, currently occurring, and an immediate concern of the child. Imminence applies.

## **Examples of the Threat**

This threat is illustrated in the following examples.

- Child demonstrates emotional and/or physical responses indicating fear of the living situation or of people within the home (e.g., crying, inability to focus, nervousness, withdrawal).
- Child expresses fear and describes people and circumstances which are reasonably threatening.
- Child recounts previous experiences which form the basis for fear.
- Child's fearful response escalates at the mention of home, people, or circumstances associated with reported incidents.
- Child describes personal threats which seem reasonable and believable.
- Child is alert for danger; unsettled; clearly not at ease, particularly with reference to his home situation.
- Child's fearful state results in not being able to concentrate; avoidance of social contact and activities; other signs of withdrawal, agitation and preoccupation.