

CHAPTER 4

Disarming the Fear Response

There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

— 1 John 4:18-19 (*The Message*)

Fear—it is a crippling and sometimes debilitating feeling, but it is so much more than a feeling. For many children from hard places, fear is a constant, though unwelcome, companion. It is a way of life. From research we know that fear left unaddressed can have pervasive and long-lasting effects on a child, including negative impacts on cognitive ability, sensory processing, brain chemistry, brain development, ability to focus and ability to trust. As a result, it distorts and dictates much of what our children are dealing with.

But let's be honest—fear is not something that only our children deal with. Many of us deal with fear and much of that fear relates to our children. We also see time and time again God telling His people through the words of Scripture, “Fear not,” and “Do not be afraid.” Not only that, we know that love—God’s “perfect love”—drives out fear (1 John 4:18). John, of course, was referring to the fear of judgment before God and the confidence that those who have placed their faith and trust in Christ now have. But this all leads us to ask, “What are we to make of the fear that seems to surround our children? What about the fear that seems to surround the adoption and foster care journey in general? How are we to respond to all this fear?”

Finding a New Best Friend for Our Children

To begin to understand fear and its effects, much less begin to deal with it, we need to develop a more complete picture of what it is and what it looks like, particularly for our children. In general, fear is a common and even natural response to people, situations and circumstances that are threatening, unfamiliar or that we don't understand or can't control. And it is important to note that fear can be very real even when what we are afraid of isn't real at all.

Thinking in terms of our children, we must recognize that for many children from hard places, fear is their best friend. Due in large part to their past, fear has ruled their lives—their mind, emotions and behaviors—for so long that it has become a familiar, and even oddly comforting, companion. Rather than having more brain activity in the frontal regions of the brain (i.e., the part of the brain that can process thoughts such as, “I can communicate my needs,” “I can communicate my wants,” “I can tell you that I am hurt or afraid,” etc.), children from hard places often operate in the more primitive part of the brain, called the amygdala. As a result, their behaviors and interactions are more likely to be driven by more primal thoughts such as, “How do I get food?” “How do I get safe?” “How do I get what I want?” and “How do I get my way?” They are stuck in survival mode and, therefore, they are prone to misinterpret communication (both verbal and nonverbal) as threatening and respond in ways that are unacceptable.

To make matters worse, many of our children have become so accustomed to living in a persistent state of fear that they no longer recognize it for what it is. And while it is one of the main obstacles that stand in the way of what we want for our children, it is still a very familiar state of being to them; consequently, many parents encounter surprising and frustrating resistance as they try to help their children confront and move beyond their fear.

In place of this old friend, fear, we need to introduce our children (and ourselves) to a new best friend: trust. In looking at the many times in Scripture that God instructs His people not to be afraid, there is a pattern that often follows. Time and time again, we see God say, “Fear not, I am here,” “Fear not, I am with you,” and “Do not be afraid, I will help.” In these words God is saying, “Do not fear, instead look to me and trust me. I am here and I will help.” It is in this repeated invitation to exchange our fear for trust that we find the foundation for what our children (and we ourselves) need in order to escape the grip of fear.

Learning to Trust and Let Go of Fear

So what do you do for a child who has become so accustomed to being fear-filled that he is literally *afraid of not being afraid*? How can you best help this child?

First, we must recognize that the issue is in fact fear itself. As we mentioned before, fear is often chameleon-like in the lives of our children. What many parents immediately interpret as defiance, poor behavior, a rotten attitude, manipulation or immaturity, may actually be driven by a fear response. Often, fear isn’t easily identifiable, so it helps to know what you’re looking for.

When working with at-risk kids, the vast majority of what we will come to know about them is determined simply from observing them. For example, we know that chronic fear in our children often causes hypervigilance. As a result, we need to be on the lookout for signs of this fear response. When you try to make eye contact, does the child’s body become stiff and rigid? Do their hands curl up, do their pupils enlarge, does their jaw tighten? How do they respond to certain sensory inputs such as light, smell or touch? These are just a few of the many ways we can observe if our children are in a constant state of high alert.

Another critical thing that parents can do to help their children combat fear is to understand their child’s need for what is called “felt safety.” As parents we are often inclined to view a situation or circumstances solely from our own perspective, only taking into account what we know and perceive (all assessed with our own, more developed reasoning abilities). We know our children are physically safe and in a safe environment, but all too often our children do not actually feel or experience this safety.

Instead, their mind and body sends and receives signals indicating the presence of perceived threats or danger. And sadly, for many of our kids this has become a chronic state. Until we can help our children replace their state of fear with a foundation of trust, they are likely to continue to misinterpret the safety and love that actually surrounds them.

Consider, for example, when you tell your child it is time for bed and he refuses to go and does so disrespectfully. You know it is time for bed, and you know he is going to be safe in his bed. But with our children we must always consider if what we know as reality is in fact the reality that they perceive. Does your child experience night terrors? Does going to bed and being in his room all alone trigger memories or fears, even ones he may not be able to fully articulate? Even if your child shares a room with a sibling, does going to bed create a heightened sense of loneliness? These are just some of the considerations that parents should be mindful of. Similar situations can play out around bath time, before meals, while getting ready for school, before leaving on a trip or in any number of other circumstances. Our children have a myriad of past harms and hurts, and their fear response is often activated (and remains activated). Again, many of our children simply live in a constant state of fear, not of anything specific, but as an overall state of being.

While this may be difficult to understand, if you think about it, our children are not altogether different from us when it comes to how they handle and respond to fear. After all, have you ever considered why God needed to offer the reminder to “fear not” over and over again in Scripture? And why is it that we need to be reminded so often of His presence and provision, and that we are to trust in Him rather than resorting to our own fear? He knows that He is with us, and because of His faithfulness in our lives, we should know that too. But all too often we forget. We fail to operate from a place of trust based on our relationship with our Heavenly Father. We revert instead to worry, fear and anxiety, which betray our position of security and protection as children adopted into the family of God. In spite of this, God is ever patient to lovingly remind and invite us (in ways large and small) to trade our fear for trust in Him. And it is important to notice that it is this trust that displaces fear. Even more, our children need this kind of patient and loving approach as we help them see fear for what it is, and as we help them build trust in us as the ones whom God has provided to help them heal and grow.

In combating the fear that cripples our children it is also important that parents focus on giving voice to their child. Throughout Scripture we see many people of God, including Moses, David and the prophets, expressing their doubts, fears and feelings to God. We are created to connect, and a primary way connection is achieved is through expressing ourselves to those who will listen, understand and care enough to respond. The trouble is that fear robs our children of their voice, so as parents we must be intentional about giving our children voice and restoring this essential avenue for connection. We must remember, however, that our children are not likely to find their voice on their own. Therefore, we must be intentional to give them voice (respectful and appropriate, of course) in every interaction, and in particular when we are correcting.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

1. What triggers a fear response in your child?

2. Does your child typically respond to fear with a fight, flight or freeze response? How do you typically interpret and respond to your child's fear response?

3. Do you generally interpret these responses or behaviors as being driven by fear, or do you often interpret them as simply defiance or belligerence?

4. Thinking about it from your child's perspective, has your child experienced a lack of felt safety involving situations where you know they are "safe" but they clearly do not feel safe?

5. What kinds of behaviors have you seen in response to this? How have you handled this?

Overcoming Fear*

Question: *My son (age 6) recently had a very traumatic experience. He and his brother were swimming in the lake and playing on a small raft when a gust of wind swept through and lifted the raft out of the water, throwing him off and into the water. The water was only two to three feet deep and neither of them was injured, but they were of course very, very scared.*

I am not sure what to do now. My son told me that he is never, ever going back in the water. I know that many parents would push to get him back on the proverbial horse (and into the water) as soon as possible, but given my son's history of trauma and his struggles with fear I wonder if that is the proper approach for him. He loves the water and I don't want him to lose that joy or the great sensory feedback he gets from it. How do you recommend I help him deal with his fear?

The Empowered to Connect Team Responds: You are right in wanting your son to get back in the water soon so that he doesn't lose his love for water and lose the nurturing sensory aspects of this type of play. You are also right to be sensitive to this situation and his reaction. It can be easy to dismiss situations like this as "no big deal," but for many of our kids, with their histories and experiences, things like this are a "big deal" and will continue to be so until we have helped them work through their fears. Especially knowing how easily fear overtakes him, there are several primary types of encouragement that come to mind to help him recover from the trauma of this experience.

First, let him tell his story about what happened (over and over if necessary). Maybe even go

to a family friend's swimming pool or a public pool where he feels safe, and in the course of swimming, or while sitting on the side of the pool having a snack, or an ice cream cone on the way home, let him tell the story about what happened and about his fear. We know that when children can give voice to their fears, they can begin to gain mastery over them. For many children, telling their story occurs best in the context of movement (e.g., swimming in a swimming pool, playing a card game, taking a walk, riding a bike, etc.). In addition, for many children telling their story is easier with a "distractor" (such as eating an ice cream cone or making a special snack or meal together).

Second, think about some type of "magic feather." Remember the children's story about Dumbo (the elephant with large ears who could fly)? In the story, Dumbo needed something that made him feel confident and empowered until he realized that he could in fact truly fly. As in the movie, there's no real "magic" to the "magic feather." Instead, the "magic feather" simply represents a tool to help your son address and overcome his fears. You could think of many examples of "magic feathers"—maybe a heavier raft, some type of weather alert watch or practicing a safety/escape plan—that could help to empower him and help him to feel safer and more in control. Your son may be able to help you find just the right "magic feather" that helps him regain his confidence and overcome his fear. Try asking him, "What would make you feel safer when swimming in the lake?" Sometimes just the ritual of buying a special item helps promote a sense of empowerment. It certainly helps a child feel "heard" about their pain and fear.

Third, and most important, assure him that you and/or his father are going to swim with him as long as he needs you to. Of course, this takes a great deal of intentionality and planning on your part, but it is worth it. Consider having the children hold hands between you and your husband (all the kids holding hands with a parent on each side) and walking into the water together, then staying close—as close as the children need you, for as long as they need you. Maybe you can even learn some new water games, or let them teach you their favorites; or maybe buy a few new water toys the family can play with together. By "wading back into the water" with him, you will undoubtedly help to restore his confidence and allow him to address his fears, even as it builds connections and a sense of deep trust between you (as parents) and him.

In the end, your goal is to help him overcome his fears and rediscover the joy (and therapeutic benefits) of playing and swimming in the water. Sometimes it is helpful to use "gimmicks," "gadgets," and "gizmos" as transitional aides for helping children heal, but we are always decidedly aware that these things are only bridge-making tools. The true healing for our children only comes in safe, loving relationships with insightful, nurturing and attentive parents. While we use these bridging mechanisms, the ultimate message we want our children to hear, understand and take to heart is we are there for them when they need us, in the ways they need us, for as long as they need us!

** Adapted from a post on the Empowered To Connect blog at www.empoweredtoconnect.org/blog.*

Key Scripture Verses

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way

*and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*

—Psalm 46:1-3 (NIV)

The Bad News is Also the Good News

As we look at the challenges that our children present we must always keep in mind that the foe we are fighting against is not our children. Rather, we are fighting side-by-side with our children against the effects of their painful history and the fear that history creates. Fear is most certainly a formidable foe and the “bad news” is that in many cases our children’s brains have reorganized themselves around their history and the hard places they have endured. However, the “bad news” is also the “good news”—the same malleable capacity of a child’s brain to reorganize around trauma or harm also allows that child’s brain to reorganize itself around felt safety and trust. This is precisely the reason that we must provide our children with the gift of trust and allow that trust to be an agent of healing and displace the fear in their lives.

As we said previously, the past affects the future, but it does not determine it. No matter what comes our way, we must stay focused on helping our children chart a new course for the future. Together we can trade fear for trust in each other and in a God who promises to be our refuge and strength in every situation.

More Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. What are some of your greatest fears?**
- 2. Intellectually, what do you know about the validity of those fears in light of God’s love and provision for you?**
- 3. What helps to alleviate your fears?**
- 4. Recognizing the role that fear is playing in your child’s life, how can you best respond to help him/her exchange his/her fears for trust?**