“It’s ten o’clock in the evening. Tucked in bed (for the fifth time) is 3-year-old McKenna. Alone in her dark room, she is convinced that Moogie the Monster lives comfortably in her closet, snacking on dolls and teddy bears.

As a thunderstorm booms outside her window, McKenna is sure that the barking of the neighbor’s Rottweiler signals he is ready to eat her, or maybe her mommy, for supper! A crash of lightning sends McKenna running to her parent’s bed, certain that safety lies with them.

The next day in McKenna’s child care center, the teacher and children hear about Moogie, the storm, and the big, scary dog.”

Fears, both rational and irrational, have always been part of most young children’s experiences. Young children often fear things they do not understand, even things that are not real. Experts agree that it is important to address these fears and to develop strategies and provide support to help young children overcome them (Akande, Osagie, Mwaiteke, Botha, Ababio, & Selepe, 1999; Garber, Garber, & Spitzman, 1993; Miller, 2004a; Poole, 2004b; Smith, Davidson, White, & Poppen, 1990).

Picture books are very effective tools to use in helping children overcome their fears. Stories can spark discussions of feelings that had been difficult to put into words. Picture books can reassure young children that they are not alone. In showing how a variety of characters react and overcome situations, books enable children to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and actions with caring adults.

Fears and Young Children

Fears are a common, natural aspect of most children’s development. Numerous studies on the topic show that the things children fear change as they develop and mature (Garber, Garber, & Spitzman, 1993; Hall, 2003; Miller, 2004a):

- Fear of strangers and separation from parents usually are the first fears to emerge in infancy.
- These make way for early childhood fears of monsters, dark places, and big, often hairy animals.
- The elementary school years may bring with them new fears of isolation, kidnappers, and thieves (Garber, Garber, & Spitzman, 1993; Miller, 2004b; Muris, Merckelbach, Gadet, & Moulaert, 2000).
- Adult-like fears of real violence, such as gangs, guns, and war used to appear in early adolescence. However with events such as September 11, the War on Terrorism, the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and Hurricane Katrina in the United States, fears are emerging at earlier ages—even early childhood—perhaps some due to first-hand experience.
Several researchers (Hall, 2003; Moses, 2003; Robinson, Robinson, & Whetshell, 1988) have categorized young children’s fears according to age (see Table 1).

Children often show their emotions differently than adults. In fact, many don’t talk about their feelings at all. Some are so young that they do not have the language skills needed to express their thoughts. Therefore, adults may not realize that children often experience fears similar to those that adults face.

If adults deny that children experience fear, or fail to address those fears, children’s fears may actually become more severe (Poole, 2004a; Protinsky, 1985; Robinson & Rotter, 1991). Some findings indicate that children often had more fears than parents expected, and the greatest differences occurred with fears of being hurt, the death of a loved one, and nuclear war (Jones & Borgers, 1988). Events in the last few years have added the fear of terrorism to that list.

The last four years have been ones of considerable turmoil in the United States. Children have lived through the devastation of the September 11th attacks, the panic over anthrax mailings, the hunt for terrorists in Afghanistan, elevated homeland security threat levels, the war in Iraq, the tsunami disaster, and hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Not surprisingly, many children feel anxious and afraid. (Rycik, 2006, p. 145)

### Young Children’s Behaviors and Needs Related to Fears

While some behaviors and needs are consistent during the early childhood years, age makes a difference with regard to children’s fears. Early childhood educators are urged to connect knowledge about children’s behaviors and needs (see Table 2) with the use of high-quality literature as a means of helping children cope with their fears (see Table 3).

#### Selecting Picture Books About Fears

Adults who wish to use picture books with children to help ease their fears must choose the titles carefully. Books that contain interesting stories that children may relate to, repetitive story grammar, helpful facts or information, and enjoyable, colorful pictures are a good place to start.

Stories with animal characters seem to be best for young readers because many young children can identify with animals regardless of their own age, gender, or race (Beck & McKeown, 2001), while human characters are preferred by older children (Pardeck & Markward, 1995).

Additional areas of interest to take into account when selecting picture books to use with children include:
- problems or situations that are of interest or relevance to young children
- characters developed to allow for sufficient identification
- story depth that enriches the meaning of life
- situations in the story that are appropriate for the developmental levels of children
- appropriate reading levels
- opportunities for readers to offer alternative solutions to situations or problems
- stories that are free of bias (Schrank, 1982)

It is also important to find books about real fears that children have, and that these fears are worked out through the story and resolved at the end (Carlson & Arthur, 1999; Schlenther, 1999; Trousdale, 1989). The following criteria are particularly geared to selecting picture books about fears.
books that deal with stressful topics including violence [Delisle & Woods (McNamee), 1981].

Intellectual Needs: Is the book accurate in its presentation of a fear? Is it age-appropriate both in how the child feels and how the fear is experienced?

Some picture books present inaccurate information. Some present accurate information—most often abstract information—that young children would likely misunderstand.

Social Needs: Does the book indicate through its characters that the child is not alone and that others share the child’s experience?

Children understand the story of a picture book as a social experience. Book characters seem realistic—even animals feel as humans do. If these feelings are similar to a child’s own, the book communicates that the child is not alone, but is sharing a stressful life experience that others have encountered before.

Emotional Needs: Does the book indicate through its characters that the child’s fears are acceptable?

Children often feel that they are “bad” if they feel a certain way, especially if they feel sad, angry, jealous, or needy. If a character in a picture book feels that same way and is accepted, particularly by adults, it communicates that the feeling is validated and that the child’s feelings are also acceptable.

It is important to note that using picture books to explore young children’s anxieties is not intended to be an exercise in early literacy. It is a time to share some important aspect of a story that might help children reduce their fears and foster a feeling of well-being by presenting accurate and age-appropriate information. Reading books together communicates that children are not alone in their experience or in their feelings about the experience.

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**Table 2. Children’s Typical Behaviors and Needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children younger than 3 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infants and toddlers are acutely aware of their surroundings. When frightened, very young children can display their distress only through behavior: eating, sleeping, toileting, clinging, being contrary, crying.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Children younger than 5 years</th>
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<tr>
<td>Preschool children are imaginative thinkers and often confuse fantasy and reality, time and space, cause and effect. Their daily world is already populated with monsters, disasters, and nightmares. Children between the ages of 3 and 5 are aware that people come and go and may fear abandonment. They worry that they, or someone who cares for them, may be harmed. Fears are still likely to be shown through behaviors at this age. Children may wet the bed or have daytime toileting accidents. Preschoolers may become increasingly fearful, clinging, or testing. They could lose their appetites, have nightmares, or cry and scream for help. Some experience speech difficulties (loss for words, stammering). Others experience fear of strangers or being left alone (Greenman, 2001). They may evidence:</td>
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<td>- withdrawal or subdued behavior (more contemplative than usual)</td>
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<td>- denial (refusing to discuss the experience/pretending it did not happen)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- participation in reenactments and unsatisfying plans involving traumatic themes</td>
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<td>- anxious attachment behaviors including greater separation or stranger anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>- clinging to previously cherished objects, crying, clinging to people, tantrums</td>
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<td>- regression to previously levels of functioning</td>
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<td>- relatively brief grieving period</td>
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<td>- denial of permanence of change (Hall, 2003; Johnson, 1989)</td>
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<th>Elementary-age children</th>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary-age children can understand what is real and permanent; however, they often lack perspective. They are still learning how events fit together and want to understand how things happen and what effect events will have. They may ask a lot of questions and want honest answers about details that are important to them. They can understand loss, so they may focus on the possibility that scary things will happen to them or their caregivers. They think about how the adults in their world are behaving. Peers shape their thinking, their feelings, and their reactions (Greenman, 2001). Their behaviors might include:</td>
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<td>- lowered intellectual functioning and decline in school performance</td>
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<td>- attempts at denial, compensation, reversal, or retribution through fantasy</td>
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<td>- obsessive talking about the real or imagined incident</td>
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<td>- isolation</td>
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<td>- constantly anxious</td>
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<td>- behavioral alterations (acting out of their usual patterns of behavior)</td>
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<td>- problems with friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>- more elaborate reenactments</td>
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<tr>
<td>- psychosomatic complaints (Hall, 2003; Johnson, 1989)</td>
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Sometimes it is difficult for children to put into words what scares them. Perhaps many things are scary, both real and imagined. After an extensive review of picture books on the subject of fears, 13 books were selected that accurately identify the five common types of fears that children have: fear in general, fear of the dark, of monsters, of storms, and of dogs. Suggestions from teachers, children, and colleagues were solicited. This list is by no means comprehensive.

### Fear in General

**Furlie Cat** by Berniece Freschet, Morrow, 1986. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

Furlie is a cat who is afraid of everything. He attempts to train himself to be brave and gets into a few scary situations. In the end, he learns to be brave with the help of his new friend—a dog!

**Jim Meets the Thing** by Miriam Cohen, Greenwillow, 1981. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

Jim is a first grader who gets scared after watching “the thing” on television. At school the next day he tries to be brave when the rest of the class is talking about it. Some of his friends find out he is afraid and call him a coward. The tables turn when a praying mantis lands on a friend’s desk and the only one brave enough to carry it outside is Jim.

### Fear of the Dark

**Can’t You Sleep Little Bear?** by Martin Waddell, Candlewick, 2002. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

Little Bear is afraid to go to sleep at night because the cave where he sleeps is dark. Big Bear enters his room with a series of lanterns that increase in size as Little Bear persists in refusing to sleep. Finally an exhausted Big Bear takes Little Bear outside into the dark to see that the moon is the biggest lantern of all and the dark is nothing to be afraid of.

**Who’s Afraid of the Dark?** by Crosby Bonsall, Harper Trophy, 2002. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

This *I Can Read* book tells the story of a little boy who is convinced that his dog is afraid of the dark. Through pictures the reader learns that the little boy is the one who is afraid of the dark. The story ends with the child and the dog overcoming their fear of the dark together.

### Fear of Monsters

**Clyde Monster** by Robert Crowe, Dutton, 1993. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

A little monster is afraid to go to sleep for fear that there is a person...
under his bed. The little monster goes through all of the feelings that young children have about monsters under their beds. In the end the monster is comforted to know that just as he would not hide under a child’s bed, neither would a child hide under his bed.

*There’s a Monster Under My Bed* by James Howe, Aladdin, 1990. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

A little boy is convinced that there is a monster under his bed. He refuses a nightlight, claiming that only his brother needed one because he was a baby. In the end, he and his brother sleep together with the nightlight, happy to have each other for safety and protection.

*There's a Nightmare in My Closet* by Mercer Mayer, Dutton, 1992. 28 pages. Ages 4-8

A young boy decides that he is going to rid his closet of monsters once and for all. Unfortunately when he shoots his nightmare (the monster) with his cap gun, the nightmare cries and will not stop crying until he can sleep in the little boy’s bed. The story ends with the victorious boy and the comforted nightmare sleeping together.

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**Find books about fears that are resolved through the story.**

**Fear of Storms**

*Franklin and the Thunderstorm* by Paulette Bourgeois, Scholastic, 1998. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

This is a short story from the *Franklin the Turtle* series. Franklin is afraid of thunderstorms and is caught in one with his friends. Each of the animals attempts to explain what thunder is. The reasons range from giants bowling to the true definition of the phenomenon. By the end of the story, Franklin feels better about the thunderstorm because he understands what it is and how it comes to be.


In this story from the *Little Critters* series, a little girl critter is afraid of a thunderstorm. Her family stays together next to the fire when the lights go out. Her father tells the family how important thunderstorms are for plants and wildlife. After sleeping in her parents’ room, the little girl awakens to find a sunny day with flowers blooming all over their yard.

*Thunderstorm*! by Nathaniel Tripp, Dial, 1994. 47 pages. Ages 4-8

All the large and small changes that take place in the atmosphere when different weather fronts move are described. These changes warn people and animals to seek shelter. The story takes place on a farm where the farmer and all of the animals can sense that a thunderstorm is approaching. This book is a non-fictional account of what happens to

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Fears, both rational and irrational, have always been part of most young children’s development. Young children often fear things they do not understand, even things that are not real.
the environment when a thunderstorm forms. Especially valuable for children who wish to know more about thunderstorms.

Fear of Dogs

*I'm Scared* by Elizabeth Crary, Parenting Press, 1996. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

This book, from a series entitled *Dealing With Your Feelings*, tells the story of a young girl named Stacey who is afraid of a new dog that just moved into the neighborhood. At various points, readers are asked questions designed to elicit opinions about what actions Tracy should take to face her fear of dogs. The story develops in different ways depending on how readers respond.

*Scared Stiff* by Katie Davis, Harcourt, 2001. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

A little girl is afraid of a big dog that lives down the street. One day she decides that she is going to become a witch (because she believes witches aren’t afraid of anything) and cast a spell over him. She learns that the dog is a female and has six babies. At the end of the story the girl overcomes her fear of the dog and hangs up her witch hat for another day.

Detailed Assessment of a Picture Book on Fear of the Dark

*Big Scary Wolf* by Harvey Stevenson, Clarion, 1997. 32 pages. Ages 4-8

A young girl is sure that a wolf is in her room. Her father convinces her that a wolf would not want to live in her room because he would be much happier “playing outside with his friends under the stars.” The young girl imagines that the wolf would have to take a bath, nap, and eat vegetables if he stayed in her room. Finally she decides that her routine would not be any fun for a wolf and concludes that a wolf would have no interest in staying in her room.

Using Schrank’s (1982) model for assessing a picture book, the following conclusions can be reached:

- This story presents a situation that is of interest or relevance to young children. The little girl in the story is afraid of the dark and she is sure a wolf is living in her room. Many young children at her age may have similar fears.
- The character of the young girl is developed to allow for sufficient identification.
- Through vocabulary and illustrations that reveal facial expressions, the girl is presented as a typical young child. This story is a sophisticated illustration of how one girl overcame her fear of the dark and for that reason ought to provide real insight to children who have similar fears.
- The story is for ages 4 to 8, and the main character appears to be around 5 years old.
- The words are mostly sight words or easy-to-decode words for young readers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Recommended Children’s Books About Fears</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Can’t You Sleep Little Bear?</strong> by Martin Waddell. Candlewick, 2002. Ages 4-8</td>
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<td><strong>Clyde Monster</strong> by Robert Crowe. Dutton, 1993. Ages 4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Franklin and the Thunderstorm</strong> by Paulette Bourgeois. Scholastic, 1998. Ages 4-8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Furrie Cat</strong> by Berniece Freschet. Morrow, 1986. Ages 4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I’m Scared</strong> by Elizabeth Crary. Parenting Press, 1996. Ages 4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Into the Forest: A Story for Children Away From Parents for the First Time</strong> by Irene Marcus. Magination Press, 1992. Ages 4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jim Meets the Thing</strong> by Miriam Cohen. Greenwillow, 1981. Ages 4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scared Stiff</strong> by Katie Davis. Harcourt, 2001. Ages 4-8</td>
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<td><strong>There’s a Monster Under My Bed</strong> by James Howe. Aladdin, 1990. Ages 4-8</td>
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<td><strong>There’s a Nightmare in My Closet</strong> by Mercer Mayer. Dutton, 1992. Ages 4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thunderstorm!</strong> by Nathaniel Tripp. Dial, 1994. Ages 4-8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
This story is free of sexist language and racial bias.
Readers could think of other reasons why a wolf would not want to live in a child’s room.

This analysis is based on the Delisle & Woods (McNamee) (1981) criteria.

**Intellectual Needs:** Stevenson’s book is accurate in its presentation of a young child’s fear of the dark and of a monster (or large animal) in a manner that a young child would understand. Lying in bed, she is convinced that a wolf is in her room. She runs to the safety of her parents’ room, as a young child might, sure that they will make everything all right. The fear arises each night before bed, which is a common time for young children to manifest a fear of the dark.

**Social Needs:** Children reading the story could easily identify with the main character and her fear. They are likely to see both as realistic. In recognizing that they have the same or similar fears, children can see that they are not alone in their experience.

**Emotional Needs:** The young girl is afraid of the dark and of the wolf that the dark might hide. Her father takes her feelings seriously, thus accepting and validating them. He finds a way to meet her need for comfort and reassurance by discussing the routine that the wolf would have to follow if he lived with the family. The father takes a potentially scary animal and turns it into a playmate—so much so that by the end of the story the young girl almost wishes that the wolf would live with her.

**Conclusion**
Rational and irrational fears are commonplace in early childhood. Many adults, however, are not certain how to be most helpful to young children as they experience their fears. When most children experience fears, adults can comfort them and scaffold their understanding. As children draw upon this support, they are likely to feel less fearful in the future. Even so, adults cannot assume that any picture book can offer exactly what young children need. Children with severe emotional issues, of course, should be referred to specialists.

Picture books, readily available,
and rich in content, can assist both caregiver and children in dealing with childhood fears. Well-done books offer appropriate information; build connections with other friendly beings, both human and nonhuman; and support expression of shared feelings. Teachers and families are encouraged to discover the many resources available and to assess their fit with children's behaviors and needs.

References


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Monsters That Eat People—Oh My!
Selecting Literature to Ease Children’s Fears

by Mia Lynn Mercurio and Abigail McNamee

To Ease Children’s Fears...

Reflect before you act

- Fears are part of normal childhood development, but current events have increased young children’s fears
- Children’s fears are related to their developmental levels
- Behaviors that indicate that children are afraid are also related to their developmental levels
- Children need help from adults, suitable to their developmental level, when they are afraid
- Carefully selected picture books can help children cope with their fears

Select books based on these criteria

- Is the situation described interesting or relevant to the children?
- Can the children relate to the characters?
- Is the story a rich one that will add to an understanding of life?
- Are the situations in the story appropriate to the children’s developmental levels?
- Is the reading level appropriate to the listeners or readers?
- Does the book offer an opportunity for children to problem solve?
- Is the story free of bias?

Assess books according to children’s intellectual, social, and emotional needs

- *Intellectual Needs*—Is the book accurate in its presentation of a fear? Is it age-appropriate both in how the child feels and how the fear is experienced?
- *Social Needs*—Does the book contain the message that the child is not alone, that others share the child’s experience?
- *Emotional Needs*—Does the book indicate that the child’s fears are accepted by understanding adults?

Ways to share good books with a child or small group of children

- Choose a time when children can settle enough to listen.
- Choose a quiet, familiar place so that the reading is part of a routine.
- Sit on the children’s level so they can move in close to the adult.
- Introduce the book by saying something such as, “I know that you have been worried about…” and encourage children to talk for a bit. Then show the cover and ask, “What do you think this book is about…?” and add, “Yes, it is a book to help us figure out our feelings about…”
- Move through the pictures one by one, saying, “What do you think is happening here? And here?” Acknowledge children’s responses with comments such as, “That might be so.”
- Start with “Now let’s read this book together.” Do so slowly, with feeling, pausing often to respond to comments and questions.
- Pause from time to time to ask questions: “What do you think will happen next?” or “What do you think (a child character) is feeling?” “Who helps (the child)?” “What does (the child) decide to do?” “What could (the child) do?”
- End with a strong finish. Ask questions such as these. “How did you feel about this story?” “What was your favorite part of the story (or about a character?)?” “Who would like to draw a picture about something in this story? (or write a letter to the child character or to someone else in the story?)”

Adult learning experiences that build on these ideas

- Reflect on the typical developmental fears that children may be experiencing and then on fears related to current events. What behaviors are possible alerts? What assistance might children and their families need to feel safe again?
- Think about which picture books might be helpful (school and public libraries often recommend books in categories).
- Carefully assess the books.
- Reflect on how to share the book with children.
- Reflect on how the book sharing went. What was learned about the children? What can adults do next that would be helpful?
- Reflect on feelings about continuing efforts to alleviate children’s fears.

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Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.