

Adults have become increasingly concerned about the number of dangers facing children and worry about children's own fears of personal or global catastrophe. Children do have anxieties about homelessness, AIDS, drug abuse, crime, and nuclear war, but most childhood fears are about things much closer to youngsters' daily lives. According to research in six countries—Australia, Canada, Egypt, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States—children from many different cultures are remarkably alike in what they are afraid of.

When third- through ninth-grade children were asked to rank a list of twenty events in order of how upsetting they would be, the primary fear among children in each country was the same: fear of losing a parent. Close in importance to this were events that would embarrass children—being kept back in school, wetting their pants in public, or being sent to the

principal. Surprisingly, children of every country rated the birth of a new sibling least upsetting of all (perhaps, at this age, children are so busy outside the home that they are less affected by a new arrival—or at age 8 and older, few were dealing with the birth of a new baby). Boys and girls rated events about the same; by and large, so did children of different ages.

For most children, school is a source of insecurity—partly because it is so important in their lives and partly because so many belittling practices (like accusing children of lying, or ridiculing them in class) flourish there. Adults can stem fears by respecting children, encouraging them to talk about their worries, and not expecting fears to simply disappear.

Most childhood fears are normal, and overcoming them helps children grow, achieve identity, and master their world.