

CHAPTER 6: Talking Spooky; Talking Unspooky

I'm going to the postbox

But you're never coming back!

Well if you have to come, come on!

The way parents talk to children about scary feelings is just as important as the Spook Contract. Fears are communicated, and often in language. Spooked parents tend to do two things when they talk to their children. They communicate:

1. High risk. Parents talk *as if* the child's fear is a definite possibility.
2. Low tolerance of anxiety. The parent tries to *get rid of* the child's feelings because they, the parent, can't put up with these feelings either. The low tolerance of anxiety may show in anger and rage or in letting the child avoid the fear.

Parents who remain Unspooked communicate

1. Low risk. They manage to talk to their children in ways that assume the child's safety.
2. High tolerance of anxiety. The parent would *like* the child to feel comfortable but knows that this may take the child some time to achieve. They do not let the child's feelings control them.

Examples of talking Spooky and talking Unspooky follow.

1. Child abductions at night.

A number of children get worried about someone abducting them at night. When the extremely rare instances of such things are aired in the media, there is a sudden increase in children being referred for anxiety about this happening to them.

Talking Spooky:

Well, I've locked all the doors and Rover is outside. He'll bark if anyone was to come (High risk - someone may come) So for Heaven's sake go to sleep and stop worrying (low tolerance of child's fear)

Talking Unspooky

That was very sad. I can see you are worrying about that happening to you. It's not going to happen to you though. (Low risk). We will have to help you back into the habit of enjoying your sleep, won't we (high tolerance of child's discomfort)

Notice in the example above, the parent says to the child that they are not going to be abducted. When it gets to this point in sessions, spooked parents, or parents prone to the spooks immediately say to me "But they might be". The actual chance of your child being abducted in the middle of the night is extremely close to zero. I ask these parents if they want to raise their children to be frightened of near zero possibilities, and what kind of life their children will have if they succeed in raising them to fear such small risks. *It is important to realise that near zero possibilities are too small to direct good parenting.*

2. Things that go BUMP in the night.

Talking Spooky

It's just a noise! I went out and checked! (High risk) There is NOTHING in the backyard, OK! I wish you wouldn't watch Spooky movies! (high risk - you'll watch Spooky movies and not be able to tell the difference between them and real life) Now STOP IT and go to sleep. (Low tolerance of child's fear) If I hear anything else from in here I'll be really angry!

Talking Unspooky

Noises that you don't know - that you're not sure of - can make you think scary thoughts can't they? (High tolerance of child's fear) They are noises that go on all day, but they seem to sound different at night, don't they? The world is a noisy place. (Low risk) You need to enjoy your sleep, and so do I, so no, you can't sleep in my bed, just because the world is a noisy place. (high tolerance of child's fear)

3. There is something under my bed, in my wardrobe, behind the door etc

Talking Spooky

I've looked under the bed! SEE! nothing there. And look here in the wardrobe. (High risk - I had to look because there might be something there) now there is nothing there either! So stop crying and go to sleep. You are being very selfish making mum and dad do this every night and it's about time you grew up and acted like a big boy (girl) and not a baby! If you call me in again you can't watch those stupid shows that make you scared like this. (Low tolerance of child's feelings)

Talking Unspooky

That's a pretty scary thought you've got there. No wonder you feel so upset. (High tolerance of child's feelings) Well, you may have some trouble with that one, but you know I've never in my life met the Under the Bed monster and not even the In the Wardrobe monster, so you know I don't think a lot of them really and I'm not about to go chasing them around in the middle of the night. (Low risk) You can if you like, but I'd much prefer to have a nice long sleep.

4. *Young child frightened of separating from parent to play in park or playgroup or kinder etc.*

Talking Spooky

Don't be such a baby. There's nothing to be scared of - look every one else is playing so go on over there and stop being so silly. (Low tolerance) If anyone does anything to you just run back to me, or scream and I'll hear you (High risk)

Talking Unspooky

It can feel a bit strange around lots of big kids. (High tolerance) I'll be here if you want to talk to me. (Low risk) No I'm not playing on the things with you, you can do that when you feel ready.

5. *Young child with the Kindergarten Spooks*

There are usually two stages to this. The first stage is when the child is still at home, and begins to feel scared about going to kinder. A similar thing can happen with the school spooks

Talking Spooky

There's no need to get upset, its only kinder (low tolerance of child's fear). You know mummy always comes back to get you, and you have some friends at kinder now. There's no need to carry on like this and I want you to stop right now.

Talking Unspooky

I can see you feel worried about kinder. I know you are perfectly safe without me there but I see you don't feel very good about it. Yes, you do have to go, because kinder is a good place for you to be. I hope you feel better soon, as it is not nice feeling scared is it? (High tolerance)

Then mother and child arrive at kinder. The child of the parent already modelling a high tolerance of scary feelings will already be doing better than the child of the mother with a low tolerance of such feelings. However, let us say both children feel fear as they separate.

Talking Spooky

Oh, just stop it and be sensible! Look, here's Lucy come to see why you are crying. She's not crying, she's a brave girl. Now let me go, I have to get to work right now, and you are going to make me late!

Talking Unspooky

You've got that scary feeling pretty badly today. I'm sorry it gives you such a bad time, and I hope it goes away fast today. When I pick you up, you tell me when you got rid of it, and I'll have a look at the things you get done today. Love you (cuddles child). Bye.

The mother in the last instance uses the kinder teacher's help to disengage the child and walks calmly out - one of the toughest tasks of good parenting.

In my opinion, sometimes the success or failure of managing kinder spooks depends entirely on the parent's ability to keep talking Unspooky. Talking Unspooky in the above manner often, on it's own, accompanied by the appropriate actions, will cure the kinder spooks.

Even with much older children the problem of talking Spooky and talking Unspooky remains.

6. 19 year old off to a party in the car.

Talking Spooky

Well don't you think you should stay overnight? I mean, you'll have to drive back after midnight (you might not make it) and I think it would be much better if you came back in the morning. (You can't drive safely at night)

Talking Unspooky

Have a good time.

The Mystery of Reflective Listening.

Talking Unspooky involves a high degree of reflective listening. Look at the examples above and you will see that parents are taught to listen carefully to children and *reflect* their children's feelings, rather than try and talk them out of the feelings. If a child is angry, or sad, or frightened, the parent is encouraged to *reflect* this feeling back - just as has been done above. The parent says

" You're feeling scared about the noises". Some parents find this pretty peculiar. Why, they wonder, are parents asked to state the obvious?

The reason is that the obvious is only obvious to the parent. The child knows *something* is happening,

but is not quite sure what it is. Often children do not know what it is that has suddenly taken over.

Children have to *learn* what to do with strong feelings, such as anger, sadness and fear. Stop a minute and remember times when you have been angry, sad or fearful. Strong emotion tends to swamp the mind and decrease one's ability to process other information. Children are not particularly good information processors in the adult way anyway. They struggle to hold onto *objective* information about what is happening around them and tend easily to react as if only their feelings and experiences are real. Add strong emotion to this and the result is often dramatic.

This is why parents are encouraged to use reflective listening. It's a bit like the parent acting like a sandbag on a flooded river. The child feels overwhelmed by the feeling but the parent gently reflects (talks about) the feelings as they *are*. *Without the panic*. In time the child will come to treat his feelings in the same reflective way as his parent. He will understand them but not let them direct all his behaviour. Reflective listening is a demonstration of what to do with overpowering feelings.

Humans go on having to put some effort into the management of strong emotion, particularly fear. Reflective listening is often used by adults talking to upset adults, it is *the* classic way of encouraging tolerance of emotion.

I've lost my job!

Well don't be silly and sit down and eat your dinner. I'm sure you can find it tomorrow.

When someone is upset, a logical lecture generally achieves very little until the person has been able to reassert the capacity to think through the emotional wave. Children take longer to do this. While they are in the grip of strong emotion, logical talk achieves nothing, but modelling tolerance of the problematic emotion achieves a lot. It helps them manage the intensity of the emotion.

Ruth

Childhood spooks can seriously affect a child's psychological growth *if* they remain serious and unchecked.

Ruth was 13. She had never been able to sleep in her room at night. She had two older sisters. Her mother and father had been arguing over Ruth's fears at night for about nine years. The problem had been worsened by a serious accident when Ruth was 6. Ruth was very scared. She described the awful fears she got at night, and began to draw them for me at night. She drew big grey blobs which covered all the page. I explained to Ruth's mother and father that a spook contract meant that they all had to help Ruth learn to tolerate her fears if they wanted her to be free of them. Her mother looked doubtful - how could we help Ruth feel better so she would be able to sleep? I explained that Ruth would not feel better straight away, but that she would only be asked to put up with very small amounts of fear at a time.

We worked out a spook contract, but mother persisted in asking Ruth if she would "feel OK" if we did this. I already knew that Ruth's mother may have a very low tolerance of fear herself, which was already suggested by the fact that she had experienced a sleeping problem exactly the same as her daughter and this had persisted until she had left home to get married. She had also been unable to work, she said, because of Ruth's fears.

It was evident to me that the spook contract, would have to take into account mother's as well as daughter's fears. We began in a very small way.

When Ruth went to bed she could not bear not being able to see her mother. Mother had positioned Ruth's bed so that Ruth could see mother watching TV. mother had to sit on a certain part of the sofa, and not move. Ruth agreed that she would like to try 10 minute periods when mother would move away and do other things around the house, and agreed that if mother came in to say hello twice before she went to bed, Ruth felt she would be able to manage this. So we began. Mother came in every five minutes. I asked her why. She replied that she just wanted to make sure Ruth was OK. I was unable to convince Ruth's mother to put any part of the spook contract into practice. Mother was waiting for Ruth to feel strong enough to do without her. But Ruth was unable to master her fear with her mother acting on Ruth's fear. The stalemate remained, and Ruth never did, to my knowledge, ever increase her tolerance of fears, and may well teach her own children, in turn, her mother's, and probably her grandmother's, fears.

The parent is a mirror in which their child peers. If they see their fears confirmed, they struggle to gain control themselves. It is the parents role to mirror the reality the child is in. If they cannot do this, and can only mirror their own fears, the child cannot learn to live in reality either. Ruth could not handle her scary feelings at school, could not get along with teachers or cope with peers. She could not tolerate the notion of her mother going away with her father for a holiday. She was crippled by her fears.