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Flashlight Treasure Hunts

Meltzer / McLaughlin "Pediatric Sleep Problems - A Clinician's Guide"

It is very common for young children to have a fear of the dark. Often, this can keep them from wanting to go to bed by themselves. The best way for anyone to learn to manage fears and worries is called exposure with response prevention. This means that the child is exposed to what she is afraid of (like the dark) but prevented from responding in the way she otherwise would to avoid her fear (like leaving the bedroom or calling out for you). The following provides guidance on how to help your child learn to face the fear using Flashlight Treasure Hunts, a very gradual and fun approach.

1. Without telling your child where it is, **hide a favorite toy in a simple location in the bedroom** that she can find quickly.
2. **Turn off the lights in the bedroom and have your child use a flashlight** to go into the bedroom and find the hidden toy.
3. **As she feels more comfortable and less scared, hide more toys (3–5)**. This should then encourage your child to stay in the dark for a gradually longer period of time.
4. **Next, hide the toys in more difficult locations**, which again encourages her to stay in the dark room with the flashlight for a longer period of time.
 - Your child should begin to **associate the darkened room with fun activities** rather than fear.
 - Over time, your child should **begin to feel less afraid and more in control**.

Important Things to Remember

It may be helpful in the beginning to reward your child with small prizes (e.g., stickers, tokens) for finding the hidden toy. For children who feel very afraid, this may give them the push to go into the dark room when they would otherwise feel too scared to do so.

Your child may cope better with the fear by learning to say positive things while on the flashlight treasure hunt:

- I am brave.
- I am strong.
- It's just for a minute.
- Your child should say

..12



Even children with the worst fear of the dark can learn to feel more comfortable in a dark bedroom, which can help them fall asleep better. As your child learns to face the fear, you may also see this confidence spread to other parts of her life. A child who learns to conquer a fear of the dark can learn to conquer many other fears and worries!