

Q&A: Children and storm anxiety

September 27 2021, by Cynthia Weiss



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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: My 6-year-old son becomes anxious and agitated whenever it storms. I have noticed that this behavior has become more frequent since we had to evacuate last year for a few days due to a pending hurricane. What can I do to help my child overcome his fear of storms? He is always asking about the weather whenever we leave the

house, and if the sky darkens, he asks if we need to take shelter to be safe. Should I be worried? Should I schedule a visit for him with a counselor?

ANSWER: It's common for [children](#) your son's age to be afraid of storms. Certainly, having to evacuate your home due to a hurricane was likely difficult for him, but you can take steps that may ease his [anxiety](#). If you find his fear of storms does not improve or if the anxiety begins to interfere with [daily life](#), consider having him talk with a therapist or counselor.

During a [storm](#), it is reasonable for a [child](#) to seek comfort from a parent. Storms can be scary. For children who are particularly sensitive to noise or light, thunder and lightning can be particularly challenging. For some children with a significant fear of storms, the problem comes not so much from a storm itself, but from the anticipation of a storm. That anticipation can result in ongoing stress and anxiety.

As you describe, many kids like your son are hesitant to leave the house if they think they may get caught in a storm. They may try to avoid outdoor activities. This stress can get in the way of other aspects of their lives, such as schoolwork, because the fear makes it hard for them to concentrate. It can be wearing on parents, too, as the children look for constant reassurance that it will not storm.

You can do several things to try to ease your son's fear.

For some children, it is comforting to know the plan for staying safe in a storm. Talk to your son about what your family did before and how that kept you safe. Share what you will do during a storm—even if you are outdoors or away from home. Reassure him that you will do whatever you can to keep him safe. If your child has been through a scary experience, such as an evacuation, talk about how that was scary and

how you as a family handled it, and explain what you will do if that situation happens again.

Knowledge also can help. Books, websites or other resources that discuss weather are a good place for your son to learn more. Learning about the weather and understanding what causes a storm can ease some children's storm anxiety. Just be careful that the sources you choose focus on the storms themselves rather than dwelling on the destruction they can cause. Likewise, if you are trying to stay up to date on a storm that may affect you, be mindful of your son's whereabouts and what he can hear.

Try to help your son decrease his "[safety behaviors](#)." These are the things he does that make him feel a little better, but they don't really do anything to keep him safe. These behaviors may include checking the forecast or asking about heading to shelter. When kids rely on these behaviors, it prevents them from learning that they can handle their anxiety about uncertainty. As these behaviors decrease, children come to see that they can manage not knowing exactly what's going to happen, and things often turn out fine.

As you work through ways to help your son handle his fear, remember that it is important to be supportive and encouraging. Never punish or belittle a child for being afraid.

If the fear continues despite your attempts, or if it worsens or becomes distressing to you, then it is time to seek professional help.

The therapy used for storm anxiety consists of helping kids face their [fear](#). It may start with simply talking about storms. That may transition to reading stories about storms, and watching videos of tornadoes, hurricanes, or other big storms. Eventually, it may include having the child outside in the rain or safely standing near a window watching a storm while it happens.

Of course, one of the challenges is that a therapist cannot conjure up a storm for a therapy session. Instead, making a plan and role-playing what children can do to handle a storm allows them to feel confident that they know what to do when a storm comes. Helping kids gradually face their fears in this way has proven successful in overcoming anxiety and excess worry.

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