All children experience fears during childhood, including fear of the dark, monsters, and strangers. These fears are normal aspects of development and are temporary in nature. In contrast, threatening circumstances that persistently elicit fear and anxiety predict significant risk for adverse long-term outcomes from which children do not recover easily. Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; significant maltreatment of one parent by the other; and the persistent threat of violence in the community are examples of such threatening circumstances in a child’s environment.

Ensuring that young children have safe, secure environments in which to grow, learn, and develop healthy brains and bodies is not only good for the children themselves but also builds a strong foundation for a thriving, prosperous society. Science shows that early exposure to circumstances that produce persistent fear and chronic anxiety can have lifelong consequences by disrupting the developing architecture of the brain. Unfortunately, many young children are exposed to such circumstances. While some of these experiences are one-time events and others may reoccur or persist over time, all of them have the potential to affect how children learn, solve problems, and relate to others.

Studies show that experiences like abuse and exposure to violence can cause fear and chronic anxiety in children and that these states trigger extreme, prolonged activation of the body’s stress response system. In studies with animals, this type of chronic activation of the stress system has been shown to disrupt the efficiency of brain circuitry and lead to both immediate and long-term physical and psychological problems. This is especially true when stress-system overload occurs during sensitive periods of brain development. Stress-system overload can significantly diminish a child’s ability to learn and engage in typical social interactions across the lifespan. In short, we know that:

- Early exposure to extremely fearful events affects the developing brain, particularly in those areas involved in emotions and learning.
- When young children experience serious fear-triggering events, they learn to associate that fear with the context and conditions that accompanied it. Very young children can actually learn to be fearful through a process called “fear conditioning,” which is strongly connected to the development of later anxiety disorders.
- Science tells us that unlearning fear is a fundamentally different process from fear learning. The process of unlearning conditioned fear is called “extinction” and actually

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Fear and Anxiety in Young Children

Involves physically separate and distinct areas of the brain’s architecture from those into which fear responses are first incorporated.

- **Chronic and intense fear early in life affects the development of the stress response system and influences the processing of emotional memories.**
- **Persistent fear can distort how a child perceives and responds to threat.** These are called “generalized” fear responses, and they are thought to underlie the expression of later anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- **Early exposure to intense or persistent fear-triggering events affects children’s ability to learn.**

There are a number of widespread misconceptions about how children experience, respond to, and learn fear. Many of these assumptions derive from overgeneralizations of what fears are typical at specific developmental stages as well as misunderstandings about what children can simply “outgrow” as they mature. Being afraid of strangers and monsters are common examples of typical fears. In contrast, research has demonstrated convincingly that excessive fear and anxiety caused by experiences such as abuse and neglect can affect the developing child in very different ways from the fear experiences that characterize a typical childhood.

Contrary to popular belief, serious fear-triggering events can have significant and long-lasting impacts on the developing child, beginning in infancy. Science tells us that young children can perceive threat in their environment but, unlike adults, they do not have the cognitive or physical capacities to regulate their psychological response, reduce the threat, or remove themselves from the threatening situation. Research also shows that very young infants can learn to fear certain places, events, or people. These learned fear responses may disrupt the physiology of the stress response system, making it more difficult for the body to respond appropriately to typical, mild stress in everyday contexts later in life. Furthermore, when fear is learned, normal situations and circumstances can elicit responses that are harmful to a child’s development.

Children do not naturally outgrow early learned fear responses over time. Fear learning early in life can often be adaptive—think about how a young child learns to stay away from hot surfaces. Thus, fear learning and associated memories that occur early in life get built into our brain architecture and do not dissipate with age. During typical development, children learn to regulate their responses to mild threats and stresses. However, if young children are exposed to persistent fear and excessive threat during particularly sensitive periods in the developmental process, they may not develop healthy patterns of threat/stress regulation. When they occur, these disruptions do not naturally disappear.

Simply removing a child from a dangerous environment will not by itself undo the serious consequences or reverse the negative impacts of early fear learning. There is no doubt that children in harm’s way should be removed from a dangerous situation. However, simply moving a child out of immediate danger does not in itself reverse or eliminate the way that he or she has learned to be fearful. The child’s memory retains those learned links, and such thoughts and memories are sufficient to elicit ongoing fear and make a child anxious. Science clearly shows that reducing fear responses requires active work and evidence-based treatment. Children who have been traumatized need to be in responsive and secure environments that restore their sense of safety, control, and predictability—and supportive interventions are needed to assure the provision of these environments. Thus, it is critical that communities be equipped to address the sources of fear in children’s lives. Where indicated, children with anxiety can benefit from scientifically proven treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, which have been shown to reduce anxiety and fear.

Advances in the science of child development tell us that significant fear-eliciting experiences early in life can disrupt the typical development of stress regulation as well as learning, memory, and social behavior. Building on decades of evidence from behavioral research, it is now abundantly clear that young children who are exposed to circumstances that produce persistent fear are at heightened risk for anxiety disorders and other mental health problems that persist into adulthood. Concurrently, a variety of prevention and early intervention programs have been developed to address the needs of young children who have been exposed to such fearful situations as physical abuse or family violence. These methods, if administered... (Continued on page 4)
Monday, May 30, 2011, was Memorial Day. While most of us had the day off, Iruka Yochien hosted their 10th annual Olympic Games Day.

Iruka Yochien Preschool is an Adventist Japanese preschool started by Elder Teruo Tomita in the Southern California Conference. Based upon the Saniku Education philosophy for intellectual, spiritual and physical growth in children, Iruka Yochien Preschool is a sister-school of Saniku Gakuin which has over 5000 universities, middle and elementary schools around the world, including Loma Linda University.

The Olympic Games opened with a march and ceremony. This was followed by several games with some interesting names: “I’m a Big Helper,” “Now, I can Shop for You,” “Jungle, Jungle Dance,” and a footrace for the older folks.

At least 50 people lined up to be counted and assigned to a team. All’s well that ends well, though: There were two Tug-of-Wars and each team won one.

The Olympics are tough on athletes and the day was quickly getting hot. The last few events were probably the most strenuous: The running race and the obstacle course race. The running race had us cheering for the littlest runners as they dashed for the finish line. The obstacle course, though, had us running and cheering!

No doubt, hours and months of hard training was required for this event: Running while encumbered with two attached hula-hoops, then hopping over hurdles, crawling through tunnels and finally rolling a huge ball toward the finish line.

In the end, everyone did a fantastic job! Everyone was exhausted. Everyone received a gold medal. And, everyone was ready for the fundraising lunch which followed.

Thank you, Iruka Yochien for a wonderful day of sun, fun and community!
Let’s Move Day

LET’S GET MOVING FOR THE HEALTH OF OUR FAMILIES!
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2011

The NAD Office of Education has joined other North American Division departments to support the Adventists InStep for Life program that is in response to the national Let’s Move initiative. The focus is on activities that promote healthy eating and physical activity in an effort to reduce childhood obesity. Unions, conferences, churches, preschools and schools are encouraged to participate in this ongoing program.

Set aside Sunday, September 25, 2011 as a day to sponsor a community activity that requires physical activity – a great way to make community contacts and build relationships! Be sure to invite the local media reporters to the Let’s Move Day activities.

Additional information, resources, and tool kit are available at http://www.adventistsinstepforlife.org.

Tips for Gardening With Children This Summer
If you are thinking about adding edible plants to your Nature Explore Classroom, try plants that grow quickly and produce large yields. Dill, mint and salad greens are some favorites. Older children can practice their literacy skills by making signs for the garden using their own writing or illustrations. Toddlers can benefit from a special planter box filled with herbs. Labeled each with a symbol implying that these plants are edible and delicious.

Fear and Anxiety (continued)

Christ-like early childhood professionals have a very important role to play in the lives of young children. Consistency, predictability, soothing words, a peaceful environment all coupled with prayer will do much to help heal fears and anxieties and relieve stress. Truly, early childhood education is a mission field.


“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you”
2 Thessalonians 3:16.

Early Childhood Education and Care
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