

## **Playing with Alarm**

**by Lisa Weiner (April 26th, 2021)**

Tummy aches and monsters in the closet. Headaches and risky behaviour. Frequent hand-washing and repetitive behaviours. These are all manifestations of alarm. Thinking about this list of manifestation probably doesn't make any of us feel very playful, however play is often just what is needed to keep our children's alarm system healthy and well-functioning.

The alarm system lives deep in all of our brains, beautifully designed by Nature to look after us by keeping us close to those who take care of us. Because attachment instincts are, truly, survival instincts, what alarms us most is separation from the people and things we are attached to.

Different kids deal with alarm in different ways. In some, the alarm system is hair-trigger, the equivalent of the fire alarm that goes off in response to a few particles of dust. For others, separation, the true source of alarm, is too painful to see, so the brain assigns other reasons to the alarm (this is often the genesis of "irrational" phobias). For others yet, alarm is too vulnerable to feel at all. These kids experience the physical manifestations of alarm, such as restlessness and agitation without consciously feeling alarmed at all. When defenses go very deep, we are left with kids who are not worried, restless or agitated, in fact, they often look cool as ice. These are the kids and teens for whom "No fear" is the mantra; the rush of adrenaline becomes an experience of relief for them and they seek it out through dangerous and risky behavior and, sometimes, cutting or burning themselves.

We can see that a well-functioning alarm system gives kids "danger alerts" that they are able to feel and respond to. What can we do to support the alarm systems of our anxious, obsessive, restless or risk-taking kids so that they can work in the way Nature intended?

As we are finding is so often the case for all sorts of disequilibrium or emotional stuckness, play can be the way through. Three types of play can support a healthy well-calibrated alarm system. The first might be thought of as "alarm system calibrating play," providing a healthy dose of alarm in a playful context. This type of play has been part of our cultural wisdom since time immemorial, as evidenced in so many of the intuitive ways we play with babies and children: peek-a-boo, hide-and-seek, and reading fairy tales and nursery rhymes with a little bit of darkness in them.

My sons loved playing "Mama's Hungry!!" When I would sense that the alarm in them was rising and getting a bit stuck, I would casually announce in a loud voice, "Boy, am I getting HUNGRRRRYYY!!!" They would shriek with playful fear and delight as they started running around the house while I chased them, trying desperately to evade my "hungry jaws" (my arms)! This type of play helps the alarm system reset and find its equilibrium in a safe context. For older kids and teens, slightly scary play may include campfire stories, haunted houses and even scary movies.

The second type of play that can support a healthy alarm system involves playing with the theme of courage. Courage is a wonderful "solution" to alarm. If conditions are conducive, our kids are able to feel both their desire and their alarm at the same time, and therefore take brave risks to reach a desired outcome. For example, if they are afraid of getting up on stage but want to be in the school play, they may be able to find the courage to "slay the dragon" of their stagefright in order to "capture the treasure" of being in the play.

There are many types of play that can plant seeds of courage, from ropes courses and playing pirates to reading stories about acts of courage and pretending to be explorers overcoming great difficulties.

Finally, the third type of play involves evoking a bit of sadness to help “drain” alarm (similar to what we talked about in the *What to do with Frustration* editorial); there are so many separations our children are faced with where the only thing there is to do is to feel the futility of changing the circumstance.

Anything that has a bit of a melancholy flavour can lead to a bit of sadness, which can help alarm transform into futility and release from our childrens’ systems. Songs, stories, movies and even telling stories about beloved pets or family members who have passed away are all indirect ways to support the sadness that is so often needed to keep the alarm system well-calibrated and healthy.

These three modes of play—alarming play, courage play and sadness play— can support our kids in developing healthy and well-working alarm systems. Play so often seems frivolous and “up to nothing”, but it can have profound effects in transforming a dysfunctional alarm system into one that is working to keep us safe and cared for, just as Nature intended. Once again, play can come to our rescue!

Dr. Gordon Neufeld, 2017 <a href="http://www.neufeldinstitute.org">www.neufeldinstitute.org</a>
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