

# Features of Short-Term Fear Corrections in Preschool Children

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## Abstract

*Teaching 5-7-year old children with fear problems to cope with them is a substantial issue for many parents. The techniques that rapidly and effectively correct problematic child fears are essential for child psychologists. This study aims to reveal how to work effectively with children's fears through short-term psychological support. A total of 90 students enrolled at various schools in Moscow between the ages of 5-7 participated to the study with a high number of fears. The study utilized the "Fear House" technique developed by Panfilova to determine the fears of children. The art therapy technique "Eliminating fears", developed by Venger was also used to help children cope with their fears. The application indicates that there was a significant decrease in children's fears.*

**Keywords:** Fears, Preschool children, Short-term correction

## Introduction

One of the most common emotional reactions in childhood is fear since the instinct for self-preservation is strongly expressed, and life experience has not yet been formed. Fear helps children be careful in unfamiliar situations and prevents them from developing, showing confidence and independence. In the rapidly changing modern world, adults have difficulties with adaptation and experiencing stress, and children cannot figure out what is dangerous and should be feared. Correction of anxiety-phobic disorders in children is currently the most urgent request of parents with children 5-7 years old. Moreover, the primary goal of short-term therapy, which practical psychologists follow, is to help relieve the client from negative experiences, to restore to a normal life (Bashaeva, 1997; Varkan, 1999; Garfield, 2002).

The psychological aspects of the phenomenon of fear in children are widely presented and described in many scientific studies. English psychologist James Sully was one of the first scholars focusing on the characteristics of fears in children and the reasons behind (1896). The well-known teacher P.F. Kaptelev was the first to study the children's psychology of fears in Russia (1901). Contemporary scholarship has gradually developed a considerable amount of scientific material on this topic. Modern Russian children's fears specialists rely on the scientific works of L.S. Vygotsky (1982), A.I. Zakharov (2000), K. Izard (2008), E.P. Ilyin (2017) and others. The concepts of fear, anxiety, and phobia are of distinct value in the psychology of fear. The common finding in contemporary thought is that in one way or another, these are associated with a presentiment of danger (either diffused, indefinite, objective and specific).

A.I. Zakharov (2000) and E.P. Ilyin (2017) argued that the concepts and causes of fear, phobia, anxiety, stress, and fear lead to the conclusion that the social environment and family are significant for a child in treating anxiety-phobic disorders. A.I. Zakharov (2000) proved that specific categories of fears prevail in each age period as a reflection of the emotional, intellectual and social development of the child. Some fears are actualized and transformed as others become less salient. The presence of actual fears depends on social conditions, information technologies and the media, characteristics of the child's age, gender, health status, etc. (Alferov, 2000; Prikhozhan, 2000).

L.S. Vygotsky (1982), describing the psychological characteristics of the cognitive development in children, noted that from the age of 5, intellectual development comes to the fore. The child, more than before, begins to understand what can harm him, what should be feared, avoided. Therefore, at the age of the most frequently detected fears, that is, at the senior preschool age (5-7 years), one can already speak not only about the emotional but also about the rational basis of fears as a new mental structure with the emerging need to study children's fears and apply short-term corrections.

In contrast to other widespread forms of psychological practice, the main characteristic of psychological correction is that it is a form of work with the psyche, consciousness, feelings and personality not in terms of their diagnosis or examination, but in terms of influence.

Psycho correction can be characterized as a system of psychological influences aimed at changing (restructuring, reconstruction, recreation) of certain features (properties, processes, conditions, traits) of the psyche that determine the occurrence of diseases, their pathogenesis, causing recurrence of diseases that affect disability and social and labor adaptation of people who have suffered certain diseases.

Psychological correction is directed not at the disease symptoms and the person in general. The object of psychological correction can be *specific features of the psyche* related to premorbid features and the features of the psyche that have changed in the process of disorders and the features of the psyche that are formed as consequences.

Psychological correction involves the impact on a person for several purposes:

1. Prevention of possible disorders.
2. Effective overcoming of disorders.
3. Prevention of disorder recurrence.

Psycho correction takes the patterns of development and education of the child and the "zone of proximal development" into account for the emotional and behavioral disorder cases (L.S. Vygotsky). The psycho correction task, as in teaching, aims to gradually transfer the zone of proximal development, i.e. what a child can do with adult supervision, into the zone of actual development and what s/he can do on his own. (Vygotsky, 1948). The most effective psycho correctional methods are play therapy, fairytale therapy and art therapy in the preschool period.

Methods are relevant to the corrections, individual and age characteristics of children.

**Purpose:** The aim is to identify and describe the features of fears and their dynamics for the process of short-term correctional techniques in preschool children.

#### Tasks

1. To identify the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of fears in preschool children.
2. To study the dynamics of fears in correctional classes in preschool children.

**The hypothesis** is the assumption that short-term fear correction allows researchers to change the quantitative and qualitative indicators in preschool children.

#### Participants

The study comprised 90 children with a high number of fears from 5 to 7 years old (50% female and 50% male). The study was conducted in institutions located in Moscow (kindergartens) during the period between 2019 and 2020.

**The theoretical and methodological basis of the study** is the provisions on the activity approach to personality formation (L.S. Vygotsky, P.Ya. Galperin, A.N. Leontiev, D.B. Elkonin, etc.); studies of the peculiarities of the development of the

affective sphere in childhood (V.M. Astapov, A.I. Zakharov and others).

The application for the hypothesis-testing utilized the following **research methods**:

1. Bibliographic analysis: data analysis available in the literature on the emotional sphere.
2. Psycho diagnostic: “Fears in the little houses” methodology (A.I. Zakharov, M.A. Panfilova) (2000).
3. Psycho correctional: “Fear Destruction” correction technique of A.L. Venger
4. Statistical: Statistical processing of data using the SPSS 16.0 for Windows application package.

**Research methods**

1. The “fears in the little houses” **psycho diagnostic technique** (A.I. Zakharov, M.A. Panfilova, 2000) was used **in the ascertaining and control** experiment allows to determine the characteristics of fears in preschool children.

The methodology describes possible **31** situations of fear, divided into groups (8 thematic groups of fears) and by numbers with age norms from 3 to 16 years.

Instructions: “Fears need to be placed in the red and black houses. Which house (red or black) scary fears will live in, and which is fearless? I will name a fear, and then you will show which house to place it in (numbers or names of fears are written inside the house). The intensity of fear is indicated in points (from 1 to 3). After completing the task, the child is invited to close the scary house with a lock, which s/he can draw himself or shade the fears so that they stay in the house and do not frighten anyone (thereby, the psychologist somewhat calms the actualized fears). Fears in the black house are analyzed and correlated with age norms.

**Table 1 Classification of fears by thematic groups**

Group	Classification of fears
1	medical fears (fear of injections; pain; blood; doctors, getting sick; getting infected)
2	fears associated with the causes of physical damage (fear of unexpected sounds; attacks by bandits; transport (cars, trains, planes); flames, fire; natural phenomena (storms, hurricanes, thunderstorms; earthquakes; floods), wars

3	fears of death (fear of dying; that relatives, parents will die)
4	fears of animals and insects (fear of dogs, wolf, bear, crocodile, spiders, snakes, etc.)
5	sleep-related fears (fear of going to sleep; nightmares, darkness)
6	fears of mysticism, fairytale characters (monsters, demons, skeletons, mummies, zombies, etc.)
7	socially - mediated fears (fear of some people; mom or dad; that they will be punished (punishment); fear of being late for kindergarten, school; loneliness (being alone); fear of making a mistake, doing wrong, fear of not being able to get somewhere or do something
8	spatial fears (fear of heights; depths; water; confined space (elevator, small room); open space (large areas)

**2. Psycho correctional Research Method**

The expression correction method by A.L. Venger “Fear Destruction” (2011) was used to overcome children’s fears.

3. Along with a qualitative data analysis of all study stages, statistical data processing was performed using the SPSS 16.0 for Windows application software package in analyzing the results.

**Findings**

**Ascertaining experiment series.**

The following fears are common for the children: fear of death (100%), fear of death of parents (96%), fear of attack, bandits (79.3%), fear of heights (78.2%), depth (71, 7%), animals (67.5%), blood (65.1%), fear of loneliness (64%), fear of being wrong (62.4%), fear of not being in time (61%), fear of pain (57% ), nightmares (56.4%).

**Corrective experiment series**

The expression correction method by A.L. Venger “Destruction of fear” was used to overcome children’s fears (Venger A.L., Morozova E.I., 2011). The psychologist uses this technique in the presence of one of the parents, who will subsequently, if necessary, remind the child of the method shown to him to overcome fear.

The technique includes five stages: preliminary conversation, image creation, image destruction,

rational explanation to the child of the meaning of the shown technique and relaxation (the last stage increases the effectiveness of the technique but is not required). The implementation of each stage varies by the child's age, mental disposition, state, attitude to the task, etc.

Stage I consists of a conversation with the child about whether s/he is scared, if so, what exactly is s/he afraid of, whether something prevents him from sleeping. The conversation was governed in a calm, casual tone. If fears are revealed according to the psychological examination data or the stories about relatives, and the child oneself does not recognize their presence, then you can tell him that small children are always afraid of something, and ask: "What were you afraid of when you were little?" Furthermore, the fears that are currently supposedly absent, but there were once are also examined. The usefulness of this step can be explained by the fact that any person, even an adult, becomes scared sometimes, and therefore it is helpful to learn ways to cope with fear. Conversation example: "Close your eyes. Remember the situation when the fear arose. Look at which part of your body it is located, whether it has a shape or not, what color it is, what size it is."

Stage II - a discussion of the child's feelings is held, discussing how you can depict (draw) fear and the subsequent creation of such a picture. If fear does not have a definite figurative expression, then it is proposed to combine it with some image: "And if it were any image, then what it would be, what would it look like?" Then the preschooler is invited to draw an image of fear that has arisen in him. This requires a paper and a set of colored pencils or markers. At this stage, the following difficulties may arise.

- The child refuses to work, claiming that s/he will not draw what is needed. In this case, it must be explained that the drawing does not have to be good at all. On the contrary, it is better to draw fears badly, since they are mal-intended and there is no need to decorate them.
- The child does not name specific fears, so the subject of the image is not clear. In this case, one of two methods are recommended:
  - a) personification of fear in the form of some very unpleasant, scary animal or character

of the child's choice (this technique is advisable when working with rationalistic children);

- b) an abstract drawing that directly expresses the emotional state (when working with emotional children).

The drawing may be preceded by a question such as: "What color do you think fear should be? What color would suit him best?" etc. With continued difficulties, a sample drawing can be given: "I would probably draw this fear like this" - with these words, the psychologist draws a few sharp black strokes, or plants a blot of black ink on the sheet, or somehow creates a shapeless black spot. Furthermore, the child continues the drawing oneself. Then the drawing is discussed during which the child needs to make a choice: "You can destroy your fear (cut, tear, burn) and defeat it, or you can befriends with it." Depending on which option the child chooses, the relevant correction path is applied.

Stage III - destructing the drawing. First, you need to have the child's approval that the drawing really depicts his fear (real or existing before, "when s/he was little"), and, therefore, now this fear is not inside (in the head, heart or chest), but outside. This means that now it is easy to drive it out, destroy it: for this it is enough to break the drawing. The child is asked to do this.

At the time when the child tears the picture, the psychologist makes an indirect suggestion, emotionally commenting on his actions: "That's right, tear into small pieces so that nothing is left! That the fear is completely gone and never comes back. Tear even smaller - so that all the fears that care you disappear. That's right! Absolutely nothing remains of that fear! » etc. If the child has disabilities, or mentally challenged, a psychologist or parent may take part in tearing up the picture ("I will help you banish the fear that it will leave and never come back to you!").

After the drawing is torn, the psychologist collects the fragments, emphasizing that s/he collects them all to one so that none remains. Crumpling the scraps, the expert throws them out with an energetic gesture ("So that there is absolutely nothing left!"). All this is done emotionally, seriously and focused.

Stage IV is a rational explanation of the meaning

of the method shown to the child. The child is told that s/he now knows how to banish fear. So, if s/he gets scared again, s/he will not be afraid but will just draw his fear and drive him away, as s/he just did. You don't even have to actually draw and tear a picture to do this, just imagine how you do it. It is useful for rationalist children (especially teenagers) to present the whole procedure as a psycho technical means, emphasizing that it is a technique that helps a person to manage oneself and the state of mind.

Stage V (optional) – relaxation through suggesting while waking or maintaining a drowsy state. Suggestions include two main themes, repeated several times with different variations: fear is overcome and will not return. The child shall not be afraid of anything from then on, and sleep peacefully. The child knows what to do if s/he suddenly becomes frightened again: s/he can quickly banish fear by drawing it and tearing the picture or just imagining how s/he does it. Do not be embarrassed that these topics contradict each other. Children do not notice such contradictions, especially in a state of relaxation that reduces the control level. It is necessary to point out the possibility of the return of fear because otherwise, the first appearance of this feeling will remove the effect of corrective work.

If the child has chosen a positive method of solving the problem and decided to become friends with a fear, then the image of his/her fear is offered in a quite fearless or even funny ways (Panfilova, 2000, 2007, 2011)

Not all children have specific fears. There are cases when the child is depressed by uncertainty, unexplained anxiety and emotions. In such cases, the neurotic child is asked to close his/her eyes and fantasize about “How would I represent my fear.” Not only to imagine what it looks like and its size, but also what it smells like, what is a fear to the touch. The child is asked to be with this fear and tell on his behalf about his feelings, why this fear frightens people. On behalf of fear, the child tells himself who s/he is, how to get rid of him. During the dialogues, the change of the child's intonation is monitored, because it is here that important memories concerning his main internal problems can flicker, which need to be worked with in the future.

The “Enrichment of drawing” technique in art

therapy is applied in more depressed patients. It is applicable to children from the earliest preschool age and has no age restrictions. Its psycho corrective action is based on the actualization of emotional representations (imaginings) associated with different colors and color combinations.

The child is asked to draw what s/he wants with colored pencils. Motivating questions are asked during drawing to develop the plot of the drawing, to enrich the palette of color tones used. If the questions do not help achieve this result, direct instructions are given: “Let's draw a boy who went for a walk near the house”, “Let's make clothes bright, colorful”, etc. The task is to develop the plot in as much detail as possible, increase the density and brightness of color, expressiveness of color combinations, use a wide variety of color tones, mostly warm - from red to green. In these classes, stories (fairy tales) are written, which is based on the first drawing and later illustrated with the following children's drawings. It is important to “enrich the picture” with color, as it helps to stabilize the emotional background of the preschooler.

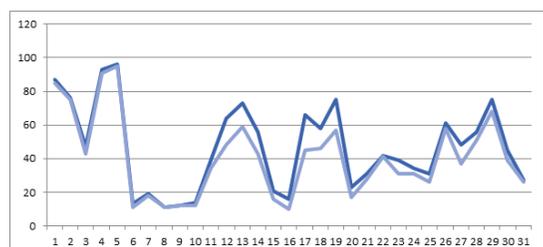
The relaxation techniques and body contact games are used in group lessons to relieve muscle tension. Group classes are held once a week (4 lessons) for four weeks.

The opportunity to choose what the child likes best- drawing, writing a story or staging fear is given in individual lessons. This facilitates an open conversation with the child about his inner problems and experiences.

### Control Series of the Experiment

#### The Control Series of the Experiment

The control experiment results show that the majority of children after correctional work had positive changes in reducing anxiety and fears. The dynamics of fears is detailed in Figure 1.



From the analysis of the data obtained, the number of fears in the experimental group decreased. Based on the calculations of paired T-Test criteria (Student's t-test) for dependent samples for the experimental group, the correction treatment was performed effectively at the  $p=0.004$  significance level.

Based on the data obtained on the methodology for diagnosing children's fears "Fears in the little houses" (A.I. Zakharov, M.A. Panfilova 2000), children in the experimental group after correctional work demonstrate a decrease in fear of confined spaces (by 19%), height (by 12, 8%), depth (by 10.9%), fear of unexpected high-pitched sounds (by 8%), loneliness (by 6.7%), pain (by 5.3%), animals (by 5%), darkness (5.1%), nightmares (4.7%), death (2.8%), fear of getting sick (2.3%).

### Discussion

The data analysis allows to conclude that fear is a rather urgent problem for preschool children, which follows from the analysis of the results of the diagnostic study.

The children are characterized by the following fears in general: fear of death, loneliness, confined space, unexpected sounds, darkness, terrible dreams, and for children of the control group - fear of death, attack, bandits, heights, depths, animals, blood.

### Conclusion

The study found a correlation between the total number of fears and the number of abnormal fears in the experimental group. It can be argued that fears of infantile and typical topics in children are not the norm and also impede the development of the child's personality, hinder creative energy, and contribute to the formation of insecurity and increased anxiety. Thus, it is highlighted that it is necessary to correct these fears to reduce the anxiety of children, which in this syndrome is already overestimated to alleviate the child's emotional experiences and tension. The child becomes more adaptive to the environment with the proper fear correction, the obstacles to the development such as anxiety and fear, disappear.

It can be argued that there are significant differences in the fear reduction during the psycho correctional influence process. Comparing the

diagnostic and control series of the experimental study results revealed a decrease in the level of anxiety, the number of fears, including abnormal fears through art therapy methods. The child reveals the feelings and experiences, desires and dreams by drawing rebuilds one's relationships in various situations and painlessly comes into contact with scary, unpleasant and traumatic images. Therefore, the results indicate the further research on the fears in children, namely, more effective diagnosis and correction by this short-term method.

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