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how not to freak
about creepy-crawlies

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what you can
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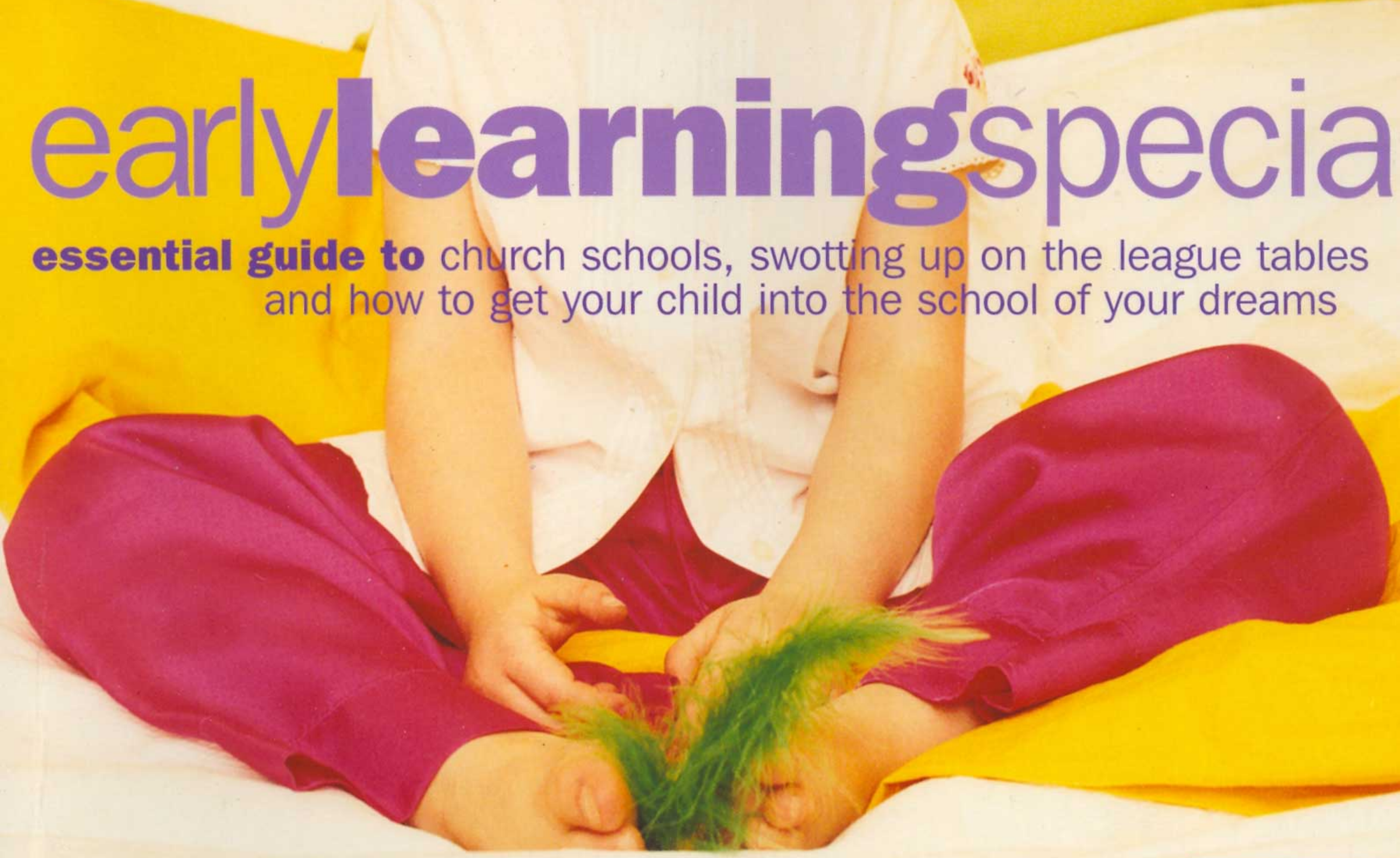

earlylearningspecia

essential guide to church schools, swotting up on the league tables
and how to get your child into the school of your dreams

plus...**sleep problems, eczema, india, bill amberg,**
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incy wincy spider...

or how I learnt to love the bugs

"Aaaaaarrrgh!" There was no mistaking the shrill cry of absolute terror. This was clearly a girl in distress. The screams came from the bottom of the garden, where my daughter and her friend were playing in the wendy house. I raced out to see what the commotion was, with ghastly visions of axe murderers or severed limbs. And I discovered both girls cowering from... a teeny, tiny spider. So small, in fact, was the spider that they could have flattened the poor thing with a finger (not that I would condone that, of course) but it got me thinking. I am always warning my children about the dangers of cars, yet they don't bat an eyelid at the sight of a juggernaut thundering along our village street. But here was my daughter genuinely panicking at the sight of a tiny spider. In Britain, none of our creepy-crawlies pose any threat, so why such fear and loathing?

I can already hear you spouting standard psychological jargon about our fears being instinctive, protecting us from venomous species. However, ask an expert arachnid fancier and they will put you right. Apparently our children aren't born scared of spiders or anything else that scuttles and slithers along the ground; we teach them. Sometimes we teach them so well, they grow up to become one of the ten per cent of adults with a phobia. Phobias run in families; if you are scared of spiders, chances are your children will have arachnophobia.

So how do our children learn to be afraid? According to experts, we have only recently as a society decided to loathe spiders. Perhaps these feelings link to our obsession with dirt and germs. Spiders' webs have become a stereotype for dirty homes; think of cartoons with deserted houses or neglected attics. We worry about invisible bugs or germs, and warn our children away from insects for fear of disease. James Hillman, an American psychoanalyst, claims that when we dream about insects we always imagine they have evil intentions. Because we think bugs are out to get us, killing us with unseen germs, he says we overkill them with pesticides and insecticides, thereby polluting the world and ultimately endangering our own lives.

Yet spiders, the most feared creepy-crawly, are more important for the balance of nature than most other creatures, especially in the tropics. Take them away and the population explosion of insects would wipe out our crops. They are cultivated around the world to help control pests, and many households encourage them as natural flytraps.

But what if your house is a tip, you're environmentally aware and won't use insect spray, yet you still think spiders are creepy? They are intelligent by bug standards – enough, in fact, to turn and look at anyone who stares at them. It seems, it's all right for fluffy bunnies to have a brain, but animals without foreheads and skinny legs that are clever too, that is another matter.

James Hillman also reckons children learn from expressions embedded in our language. Expressions like "web of corruption", "what a tangled web we weave", "computer bugs", "stop bugging me"... the list is endless. Add to that the images from films where spiders are scary and menacing, nursery rhymes like Little Miss Muffet, and you can see that we don't give our kids a balanced view of creepy-crawlies.

The best thing you can do for your child is to mask your own prejudices, and make a positive attempt to treat all animals with respect and consideration. Explain that spiders are useful as they keep down flies which can spread disease.

And lead by your example. If you squash every creepy-crawly that is smaller than you, one day your toddler will copy you, and on that occasion he may pick a fight with a wasp. So next time your child presents you with a wriggling earthworm, suppress that shudder of distaste and start raving about how well it aerates the soil ■

CREEPY-CRAWLIES

Fascinating facts about creepy-crawlies you didn't want to know (but your child will love)

- For the fussy eater, why not serve up tarantula? Apparently it tastes a bit like prawn or chicken. Spiders are a delicacy in many parts of the world; they are 60 per cent protein, only 10 per cent fat and rich in minerals and vitamins.
- Little Miss Muffet really existed; her name was Patience, she lived in the 16th century, and her father used to feed her ground-up spiders.
- Spiders are very good mothers. Some spiders lay egg sacks and if the sack is taken away, they grieve and adopt a substitute 'baby'.
- Spiders' webs are stronger than steel of the same thickness, yet twice as elastic as rubber. They can stretch several times their length before breaking. Spiders use their webs as fly traps, fishing nets and parachutes.
- Spiders have a memory and can solve problems, for example, when they sent spiders into space (yes, they really did), the spiders were able to work out how to spin their webs defying gravity. Now that's clever!.

Jumper from Wade Smith Junior

Text **Caroline Deacon**
Photography **David Handley**
at Jackie Gibbs

imaginary friends who can join in their games, such as a teddy or a doll. When children play with these 'friends' they talk to – and for – them, much as they talk to – and for – their dolls. Children say things such as "Do you want to go out to the garden?" then answer "You do? Well let's go."

In fact, play with imaginary friends is almost exactly the same as play with a stuffed rabbit, except that the child has to create the friend as well as the game. This change from a friend who is talked about to a friend who is played with does not come about because children have different needs; it comes about because they have different skills, and more advanced powers of imagination.

Although children begin to imitate by the time they are about 14 months, and can participate in a simple pretend game if someone else creates it for them, they can not engage in elaborate role-play with other children of their own age (or create such games to play by themselves). A three-year-old will feed a doll and take both sides of a simple conversation but does not create the elaborate fantasy worlds and complex story lines that older children create. A two-year-old will talk to a doll because she has seen others doing it, and she has the doll there to remind her what to do.

Imaginary friends do not remind a child how to play, and since they do not exist, they need to be constantly created. My sister's eldest daughter, Jenny, had two friends, Didder and Dodder, who lived under a fir tree in the garden. They looked after her sandpit and toys, and played with her when she was in the garden. Never very keen on dolls or teddies, Jenny used Didder and Dodder in her imaginary games in the same way many children use such toys in their play. At three-and-a-half Jenny could often be seen talking to her imaginary friends and handing things to them. Her younger brother and sister continued the family tradition by playing with Didder and Dodder too, perhaps because the fir tree became known as "Didder and Dodder's tree."

Another common function for imaginary friends is to give the child in imagination what he cannot have in reality. My sister Kate created a imaginary and super-capable version of herself, whom she called "Me when I was two". Faced with something I (her older sister) could do, or had done, she was likely to say "I could do that when I was two."

As time went on, the exploits of Kate age two became more fantastic. I remember her telling me she could fly over the woods, jump as high as the bus and shin to the top of the lamp post. She had also climbed the chimney to help Santa down with his sack, and ridden on a Catherine wheel and gone to the seaside all by herself. The fact that I remember these claims suggests it annoyed me. These stories which she began telling when she was about three became the roots of a skill that she still possesses: the ability to spin a good yarn.

Sam, the youngest of four, created a imaginary friend, who will be familiar to many parents. He called him Tiger. Tiger was a naughty and clumsy creature who was blamed whenever the milk spilled as Sam tried to pour it onto his cereal, or a drawer was pulled out too far and fell to the floor, or the garden tap Sam had turned on could not be turned off again. Tiger stole the biscuits and left the toys on the stairs. No-one believed Sam, of course, but because his family tended to play along, the game continued. His wide-eyed look of innocence as he described Tiger's antics diffused his parents' irritation and his stories were met with amused disbelief.

WHO NEEDS FRIENDS?

Young children create imaginary friends for a variety of reasons, including:

- It gives them a friend to talk about, which makes a child feel included; it also boosts their self-esteem and confidence
- It encourages a child's creative development and improves concentration by thinking up elaborate pretend play scenarios
- Imaginary playmates can help children improve social skills and work out appropriate ways to deal with difficult situations. Parents can help by prompting your child to think about areas, like sharing or taking turns
- Imaginary friends make great scapegoats (even though parents don't generally tend to be that gullible, you can still marvel at your child's ingenuity and creativity)
- They give parents an insight into your child's world; children often feel more at ease confiding their inner emotions to their special friends. This gives parents a chance to talk about anything that may be worrying or upsetting their child

Not all imaginary friends are good friends; some are frightening. In fact, 'bad' friends are much more common than good ones. Monsters under the bed, a scary picture in a book or an evil plant in the garden are very common. Just as a good friend helps a child come to terms with the good things in life, so monsters help him play through his fears.

When adults develop phobias, psychologists ask them to think about the object that frightens them while they relax. Gradually through therapy they turn that thought to reality: first a picture of a snake, then a snake in a cage. Children learn to desensitize themselves from their worst fears in much the same way. A frightening thought is best dealt with when the child is playing, sitting on his mother's lap or tucked safely into bed at night.

Both happy and fearful escapism persists into adulthood. Why else do we love romance, TV soaps, hospital dramas and thrillers? Who does not dream of what they will do with their lottery winnings? The best and the worst are worked through in our imaginations.

Many teenage girls (and some grown women) daydream about imaginary relationships. The imaginary scenes adults create are more sophisticated than the games of preschool children, but in many ways they serve the same purpose.

That knight in shining armour is someone who really appreciates us, makes us feel desirable and special, even if only in our dreams. We are not carried away by our heart's desire, but our belief in ourselves bolsters our self-esteem, which is probably what happens to a young child when he plays with his imaginary friends. As the controller of the game he is the VIP. Next time he enters the fray he feels a little bolder, a little surer and more capable of playing with a real friend.

Such escapism is almost always good for us. It can, of course, get out of hand, and in an older child too much vivid imagination may indicate hidden problems. But if we are perceptive, and our child also plays with real friends, there is little to fear.

Studies of children who have comfort objects suggest that they cope much better with new situations than children who do not have comfort objects. The same is probably true of those who can create dreams for themselves when needs arise. The art of 'coping' is very basic to our sanity and security, and the child who knows how to create a make-believe world that brings her happiness and security learns resilience ■

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