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# Mindful Parenting

*nourishment for the nurturer*

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all you can*

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*The unexpected benefits  
of baby brain*

*Better,  
together*

**IN THE MAZE OF  
PARENTHOOD,  
DON'T LOSE  
EACH OTHER**



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# Wrapped in cotton wool

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We often assume children will grow out of phobias. But what happens when they don't? What happens when we don't?

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**W**hat I'm about to reveal, is a closely guarded family secret. It's next-level embarrassing. So much so, that when I told my mother about this article, she replied, "You're really going to write about that?" I'm hoping I'll have overcome it by the time you're reading this, therefore making myself immune to anyone who wants to use this knowledge to taunt me. At least, that's the theory.

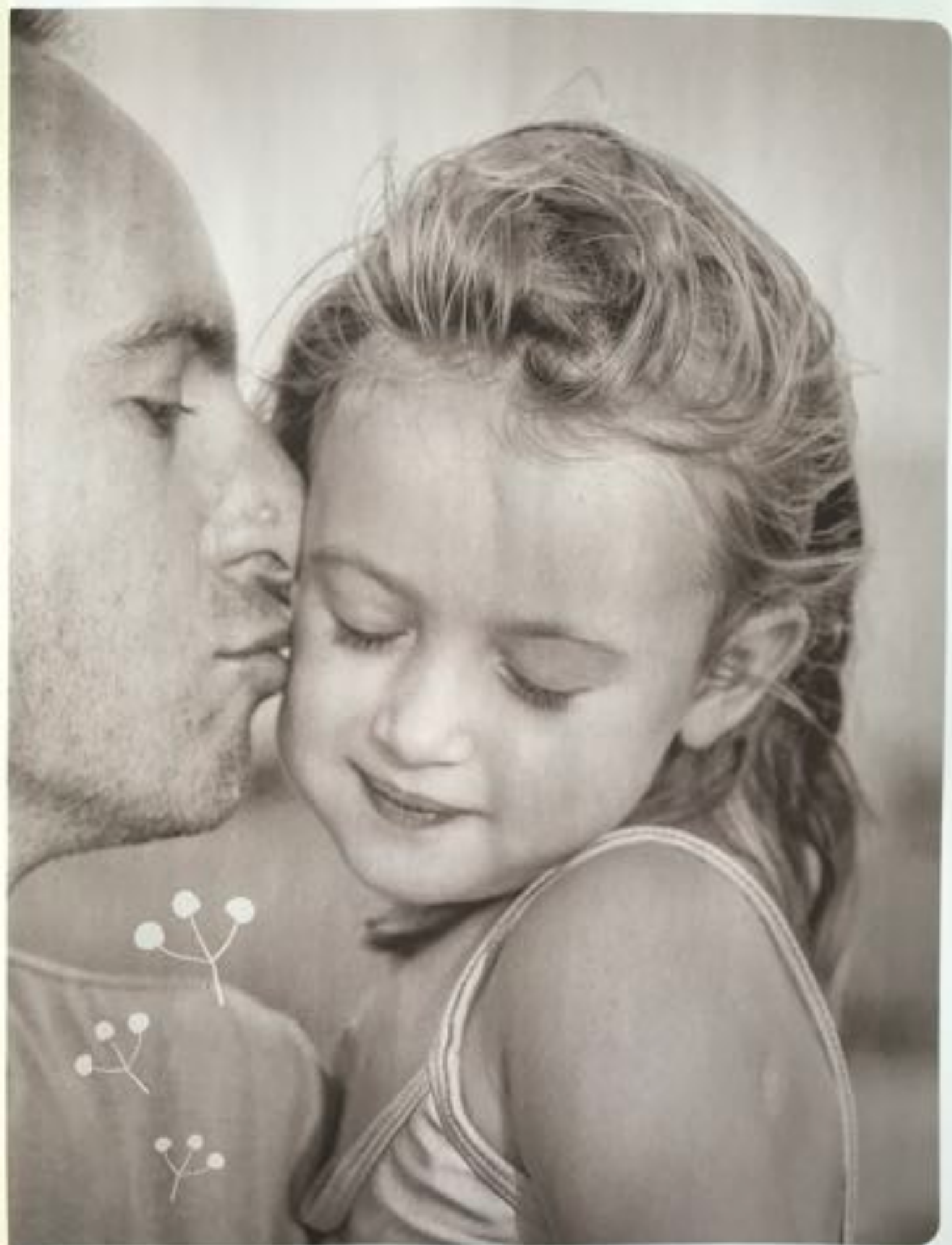
I have a phobia of cotton wool.

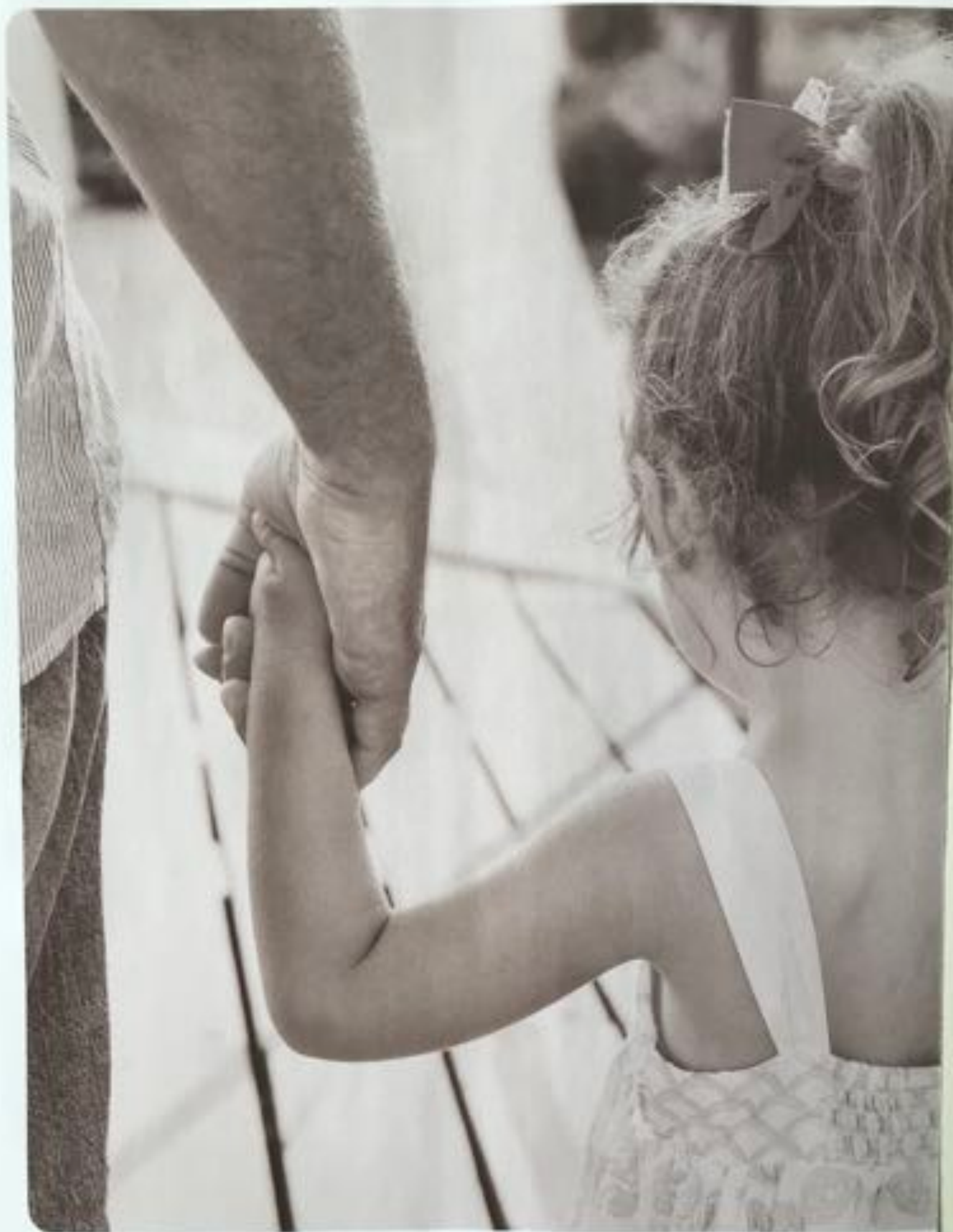
Touching - or even seeing - those seemingly harmless white fluffy balls makes me recoil in disgust. My body shudders the way you would if you saw a giant, hairy spider and my mouth fills with the metallic, salty taste of blood. It's such an unpleasant experience, that I will do anything to avoid it. Including skipping essential medical tests whereby these balls of fear are involved.

Thanks to a bad childhood experience in the school dental van, this phobia is twinned with an overwhelming fear of blood. As a result, I am terrible in emergency situations. And whilst I previously had no desire to tackle my fear, an unfortunate incident with a pair of baby nail clippers has made it apparent I need to make a choice. I can protect my phobia or my child. Not both.

#### THE ORIGIN OF FEAR

According to clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Hughes, not all phobias are a result of environmental factors (such as traumatic events). Genetics also play a part. "If there's a family history of anxiety, that might put someone at higher risk for developing a phobia in childhood... whether or not a child develops a phobia depends on the balance of their exposure to risk and protective factors. So, two children might experience the exact same traumatic event, and one might develop a phobia but the other might not. Especially if one child is genetically vulnerable to anxiety and the other isn't." The dentist, it would seem, mightn't be the only thing behind my quirky fears.







### THE FEARFUL BRAIN

If you could peek inside the brain of a person in the grip of a phobic panic, you would see an amygdala working overtime. "When a child feels a threat (or a perceived threat), this triggers a fear response in the amygdala which then signals the body's motor functions to be on the ready," says children's wellbeing expert, Dr Maxine Thérèse.

This series of events is known as the 'fight or flight' response and while it can feel uncomfortable, according to Dr Hughes, its biological function is to keep you safe. "An increased heart rate, for example, means that oxygen and nutrients can be delivered to your muscles at a faster rate, so they have the strength they need to help you fight or flee from danger."

This response might make sense when you almost step on a brown snake coiled on the footpath. But it seems nonsensical when it occurs after you spot a giant bag of cotton wool balls on sale at the local pharmacy. "Unfortunately, with phobias, the fight or flight response is being triggered when it doesn't need to be. Your body is reacting to a neutral or safe object as though it's dangerous," says Dr Hughes.

### CONNECTING TO FEAR

What if it's your child with the phobia? Can they grow out of it? Are there things we do as parents that make it better or worse? The first thing to recognise, says Dr Thérèse, is that your child's fears are valid. And those fears represent an opportunity to connect with the emotional experiences of our children. "As a parent, you can allow the space to process with the child, the feelings and emotions as well as stressful thoughts about their fear. Be mindful that you can support the child to feel secure even with the most fearful situation with reassuring words and the space to process any scary feelings for themselves."

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DR MAXINE THÉRÈSE

As tempting as it may be to cushion our children from their fears, Dr Hughes cautions against creating avoidance behaviours (such as not having balloons at a birthday party if your child has a fear of them). If the phobia is impacting your child's life or future, it's important to seek help sooner rather than later. "Phobias don't tend to resolve without treatment, in fact they often get worse, so it's better to treat them in childhood rather than later," she says.

### OVERCOMING FEAR

The most effective method psychologists use to treat phobias is the very reason people like myself often avoid seeking help. In order to overcome your fear, you need to confront the very thing you are afraid of. Exposure therapy can be a terrifying concept to adults or caregivers dealing with anxiety. "I know the idea of starting treatment can feel scary, and if you've had your phobia your entire life, it can be hard to believe it's fixable, but with the right treatment, it can and will get better. Feeling more anxious to feel less anxious sounds backwards, but it works," says Dr Hughes.

As terrifying as it is to take that first step, I'm doing it. I want to be the kind of mother who is reliable in an emergency situation and in the toilettes aisle, I choose my son.

Words by Annie Bucknill