



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Understanding and Responding to Fear

What are toddler fears?

Fear is a normal part of growing up. Around age 3, it is very common for children to develop new fears. Your toddler may become scared of the dark, loud noises, animals, doctors, or even people in costumes. This does not mean something is wrong. It means their brain is growing and their imagination is getting stronger.

Why do toddlers get scared?

As toddlers grow, their memory gets better and they start to imagine what might happen next. They also do not yet understand the difference between what is real and what is pretend. A dragon from a bedtime story can feel just as real as the family dog. Changes at home, like a new baby or a new babysitter, can also make children feel less safe and more fearful. Some children are also naturally more cautious or sensitive. They may need extra time to feel comfortable in new situations.

What you can do

- **Name the fear.** Give your child words for what they are feeling. Say, "You feel scared of the dog's barking." Naming a fear helps make it feel smaller.
- **Stay calm.** When you stay calm, your child feels safer. Your presence helps even if you cannot fix the fear.
- **Never tease or argue about the fear.** Even if it seems silly to you, the fear feels very real to your child. Teasing can make the fear last longer and make your child trust you less.



- **Validate their feelings.** Say, "I know you aren't sure about the person wearing the dinosaur costume. I will hold you until they walk by." This teaches your child that their feelings matter.
- **Give them tools to handle everyday fears,** like being afraid of the dark. Offer simple ways to feel safer, like a favorite stuffed animal or a special goodnight. Let your child help decide what helps them feel better.
- **Take small steps.** Do not force your child to face a fear all at once. Let them move at their own pace. Praise every small step forward. Say, "It was so brave of you to pet that dog."
- **Use pretend play.** Act out scary situations with dolls or stuffed animals. This helps children work through fears in a safe and fun way.
- **Do not try to avoid the things your child is afraid of.** Avoiding scary situations tends to make fears even bigger. Is your toddler afraid of the bus they take to school? Plan ahead for how to comfort them. They can help you make a plan. You can bring a favorite stuffed animal, book, or snack. You can decide on silly songs to sing. You can help them do some deep breathing with you. You can make up a funny name for the bus or introduce your child to the driver. With your support, they will learn to overcome their fear.
- **Read books about fears.** Stories help children see that other kids feel scared too and that fears can get better over time.

When do fears go away?

Most toddler fears fade on their own as children grow and develop more logical thinking. When you are patient and calm, they will learn that the world is a safe place. And that they can always come to you when they feel scared.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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