

Managing Toddler Fears



WHY IS MY CHILD AFRAID?

Babies and toddlers often develop big fears. Sometimes what was familiar yesterday, may be scary today. Babies might startle when they hear loud noises. They may have intense stranger anxiety. Toddlers can suddenly become afraid of the dark, noises, bath time, or even animals. This happens as they become more mobile and move away from your protection.

By 2 years old, most children love the world of pretend. They don't fully understand the difference between fantasy and reality. Their imagination can lead to fears. Another factor can be recent changes in a child's life. It could be separation from a loved one, a new baby, a new babysitter, or a recent move. Even things that seem minor can leave a child feeling insecure and more fearful.

Your child's temperament is also important (see *Temperament* article). Children who are more cautious or easily overwhelmed are more likely to develop fears. If you have a "slow to warm" baby, allow time for them to adjust to new people and settings.

Trying to reason with a toddler about their fears just doesn't work. Here are some things you can do to help comfort your toddler:

- **Always introduce new people to your child.** This lets them know the new person is OK. It can be as simple as, "This is my friend Sherry. She came to visit." Your body language is important here, too, as you let your child know that Sherry is a welcome guest.
- **Accept toddlers' fears.** Give them words to express their fears. Naming the fear helps reduce their anxiety—name it to tame it. Say, "You feel scared of the dog's barking."
- **Don't ever tease about the fear (even in good humor).** And don't try to talk them out of it. This can make the fear last longer, and your child trust you less. Validate and label feelings: "I know it feels scary when it thunders. It is very noisy, but we are safe. I'll stay with you until the storm is over."
- **When your child seems fearful of a place or activity, don't push them to participate.** You can help by joining the activity yourself. You could also pair your child with another child who is participating. You know your child best and can see how they react to new situations.



- **When a child is scared, you may be able to comfort or distract them.** If you can't, then just stay close and offer support.
- **Stay calm when your child shows you that they are afraid.** It's soothing when you stay calm, even if you can't "fix" whatever the fear is.
- **Don't go out of your way to avoid something your child fears.** Purposely helping your child avoid something can make their fear more intense. Instead, support them when they experience the fear. That doesn't mean you should go out and try to find it, of course. For example, if they are afraid of the bus, you can help prepare them and support them when you have to take the bus.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

