



Be curious

When your child is showing fear, ask questions like, “What do you think might happen?” and “What are you picturing in your head?” Sometimes fears can come from a misunderstanding or missing information, and it’s easy for adults to misunderstand a child’s fears (e.g., believing a child is afraid of the vacuum’s loud noise when they are worried about getting sucked in).

Distract and narrate

If your child seems stuck, redirect their attention with an “in the moment” distraction:

“Oh, look over there at that silly squirrel with its tail bouncing up and down.”

“Oh, that cloud looks like a big ice cream cone!”

“Can you hear the bus? I think it must be arriving soon.”

This simple trick can help shift their worries and what-if’s and bring them back to the here and now.

Get used to it

Familiarity can ease anxiety and fears. It may take some creative thinking, but there are usually playful ways to help children slowly face scary situations or objects. For instance, create a picture book of the thing your child is afraid of and read it together, modelling that you are not afraid. Or together help their favourite stuffy feel less afraid: teach the stuffy to take some calm breaths, or sing a song together until the stuffy feels calmer.

Acknowledge that their fears are real

Avoid saying things like “It’s not scary!” or “See? There is nothing to be afraid of!” because it *is* scary—to them! Acknowledge their fears while also adding helpful information:

“I see that you are watching for bees. You don’t want to be surprised by one.”

“It looks like the bee wants to find flowers. It doesn’t want to come near us. We must look like scary giants to little bees!”

Communicating that you know what’s going on will help your child feel less alone with their fear.

But try not to overfocus on fears and worries because that can sometimes make them grow.

Empower

Children can usually sense when they are being pushed or pressured, no matter how subtle we try to be (e.g., “Oh, doesn’t that look *fun*?” or “But you *love* swimming!”). This can lead to more resistance, and less willingness to branch out and explore. Instead, brainstorm things that can help them *act* as if they are brave. Maybe they can use a flashlight, put on their superhero cape, or hold a magic wand or shield, or put on a scary mask themselves.

Celebrate

Facing fears takes a long time and is hard work. Recognize and celebrate brave small steps: “I noticed that you were able to walk past that dog. That was so brave!” When it comes to facing fears, a special treat on the other side to focus on (such as a trinket or a prize from a treasure box) can help your child get over the hump.