



Play helps children form a relationship with their fears and feel empowered. In their imagination and the land of “not for real,” your child can safely face things that they are afraid of or “redo” scary or stressful experiences from the past. In play, your child is able to slay their big scary dragon and feel strong, capable and in control! Real fears can start to shrink in size when children can face and conquer them—on their own terms.

Here are some ways to help your child play with their fears:

- Your child may find it easier to talk about scary things at a distance. For instance, their favourite stuffy may suddenly be afraid of going outside. Catching these moments can give you a chance to explore the topic (e.g., “What is Wolfie afraid is going to happen if he goes outside?”).
- Help your child feel more confident by “getting used to” things that are alarming in real life. For example, you can play hide-and-seek and find them over and over to work through their fear of being lost or alone, or use flashlights to make funny hand shadows while facing the scary dark.
- Together with your child, create pictures or fantasies related to their fear, such as being flushed down the toilet into a magical land of candy, or being kidnapped by pirates and bravely escaping. Make up a story of how your child bravely conquered their fear. This shows your child that you understand them, and that their fear makes sense, and offers them a new way to think about what they are afraid of.
- Draw a picture of their worry and give it a name (e.g., the worry bug or Mr. Worry) to help your child separate their worries from themselves. Together, talk back to the worry: “Nice try, Mr. Worry!” or “Not today!” or “We don’t believe you.”



Note: When helping your child encounter their fears through play, take care to consider their emotional state and readiness. If they are tired, hungry or having a rough day, it’s not the right moment. Overcoming fears can take a long time, and you can’t rush the process. Slow and steady wins the race!

Making art can help your child with fears

Art activities allow children to indirectly express or reveal their fears and worries. Materials like playdough, slime and finger paints can also be soothing for some children and help to calm nervous systems. Being fully engaged and present in a creative project can distract children from their worries and calm both mind and body.

Your child may need some extra patience and encouragement. Model being playful and messy with art and not making everything look just right.



Using play to address some common fears in young children

- Fear of falling in the toilet** – Explain that they are too big to fall in and that if they did, they would only get wet. Find something that will float (like a small balloon or a larger plastic ball) and put it in the toilet as you flush. Show that it doesn't go down and that their body is so much bigger! A toddler ring with handles and a step stool can help your child feel more steady and secure.
- Fear of getting hands messy** – Plenty of opportunities to get dirty will naturally arise in your day—try to mix in some fun and play! Encourage messy play using chocolate pudding finger painting, or making slime and playdough. If your child is afraid of sticky fingers, use corn syrup or maple syrup and make fingerprint designs. If their fear is of getting dirty, ask your child to help you make holes in the dirt and plant seeds together.
- Fear of bugs** – Play with plastic bugs. Show how to brush or scare bugs away by waving their hand or an object like a hat. Getting close to bugs can help show they are safe—but make sure you model calm yourself (or find someone who can). Create a cute story: “Oh, look at this beautiful bee—she is taking a rest before she flies home to tuck her babies into bed!” If your child is afraid to go outside because of insects, plan a fun outdoor activity and provide an incentive to stay outside for a certain amount of time.
- Fear of dogs** – Read picture books and watch shows with friendly dogs (like Clifford). Work up to books and videos with real dogs. Teach how to read animal body cues (e.g., wagging tail), how to ask the owner if it's okay to pet their dog, and how to approach slowly, putting out a hand, face down. Talk about how dogs can sometimes be scared of us and may need some reassurance too. Model friendly encounters with dogs: start with calm, sleepy leashed dogs and work your way up.
- Fear of the vacuum cleaner** – Create a slide for stuffies with the long vacuum attachment. Dress up the vacuum in a hat and give it a name (Mr. Big Nose). Have Mr. Big Nose blow his nose—make a silly exaggerated nose-blowing sound as you turn it on briefly. Repeat several times. Invite your child to help you find things around the room for Mr. Big Nose to suck up.
- Fear of masks/costume characters** – Together, cut out some small masks for toys. Take turns looking through the eye holes of a mask. Read picture books about Halloween with images of pets or children in masks. Provide some non-scary plain masks for the kids to decorate with craft material. Try on non-scary costumes and take photos and show them what they look like.

 For more ideas, see [Strategies for Helping Your Child with Fears](#).