



What to do: For babies.

Play peek-a-boo.

It will start to teach your baby that even when your face disappears, you're still there. (That, and because the way their face lights up when they see you is gorgeous.)

- **Teach them that separation is temporary, but go gently.**

Practice leaving the room for short periods at a time so your baby can learn that you will always come back. Start with a minute, then, when your baby is ready, move up from there. When you are ready to leave them in the care of others, start with people they are familiar with for short periods, then work gently up from there.

- **Always say goodbye.**

Saying goodbye is the most important thing to do when you leave them. Making a quick dash while they are distracted might make things easier in the short term, but it will risk your baby being shocked to find you're not there. This can add to their fears that you'll disappear unexpectedly and it also runs the risk of chipping away at their trust. Have your 'kiss and fly' routine ready – tell them you're leaving, a quick kiss, and let them know you'll be back soon – or whatever works for you. It will be worth it in the long run.

For kids and adolescents.

- **Give them plenty of information.**

Even though kids at this age are aware of their environment, they don't understand all of the things that go on in it. Thunder feels really scary – it's unpredictable, it's loud, and for a curious, powerful, inquisitive mind, it can surely feel as though the sky is breaking. For the child who is still getting used to the world, it's not so obvious that they won't be sucked down the plughole when the bath drains. Point out what they can't see. ('Water fits down the plughole, but my arm won't fit, neither will this boat, or the vacuum cleaner, or the car, or a hippo, or my foot, or my elbow. An ant would fit – wait – maybe that's why ants don't have baths! If I'm away from the plughole, nothing happens to me. See?')

Give them all the information they need to put their scary things in context, where they belong. There's no such thing as too much talk and at this age, they're so hungry to learn. Make the most of it. By the time they reach adolescence, you will no longer be as smart (or sought after) as you think you should be. Celebrate their curiosity and feed it. They love hearing the details of everything you know. You're their hero and if anyone knows how to make sense of things, it's you.

- **Meet them where they are.**

Some kids will love new things and will want to try everything and speak to everyone. Others will take longer to warm up. Unless it is a child who races towards the unknown like it's the only thing to do, introduce new things and people gradually. There's so much to learn and little people do a brilliant job of taking it all in when they're given the space to do it at their own pace.

- **Play**

Play is such an important part of learning about the world. So much of their play is actually a rehearsal for real life. If your child is scared of something, introduce it during play. That way, they can be in charge of whatever it is they are worried about, whether it's playing with the (unplugged) vacuum cleaner, being the monster, or having a 'monster' as a special pet. Give

them some ideas, but let them take it from there. Through play they can practice their responses, different scenarios, and get comfortable with scary things from a safe distance.

- **Be careful not to overreact.**

It's important to validate what your child is feeling, but it's also important not to overreact to the fear. If you scoop your child up every time they become scared, you might be inadvertently reinforcing the fear. Rather than over-comforting, get down on their level and talk to them about it after naming what you see – 'That balloon scared you when it popped didn't it.'

- **Don't avoid it.**

It's completely understandable that a loving parent would want to protect their child from the bad feelings that come with fear. Sometimes it feels as though the only way to do this is to support their avoidance of whatever it is that's frightening. Here's the rub. It makes things better in the short term, but in the long term will keep the fear well fed. The more something is avoided, the more that avoidance is confirmed as the only way to feel safe. It also takes away the opportunity for your child to learn that they are resilient, strong and resourceful enough to cope. It's important for kids to learn that a little bit of discomfort is okay and that it's a sign that they are about to do something really brave – and that they have what they need inside them to cope.

- **Let them explore their fear safely.**

Introduce the fear gently, in a way that your child can feel as though they have control. If your child is terrified of the vacuum cleaner, explore it with them while it isn't plugged in. If your child is terrified of dogs, introduce them to dogs in books, in a movie, through a pet shop window, behind a fence. Do this gradually and in small steps, starting with the least scariest (maybe a picture of a dog) and working up gently to the fear that upsets them most (patting a real dog). The more you can help them to feel empowered and in control of their world, the braver they will feel. (For a more detailed step by step description of how to do this, [see here.](#))

- **Don't give excessive reassurance.**

If your child has had a genuine fright or is a little broken-hearted, there is nothing like a cuddle and reassurance to steady the ground beneath them. When that reassurance is excessive though, it can confirm that there is something to be worried about. It can also take away their opportunity to grow their own confidence and ability to self-soothe. Finding the scaffold between an anxious thought and a brave response is something every child is capable of. Understandably, it can be wildly difficult to hold off on reassurance, particularly when all you want to do is scoop them up and protect them from the world that they are feeling the hard edges of. What is healthier, is setting them on a course that will empower them to find within themselves the strength and resources to manage their own fear or anxiety. Reassure them, then remind them that they know

the answer, or lovingly direct them to find their own answers or evidence to back up their concerns. Let them know you love the way they are starting to think about these things for themselves.

- **Understand the physical signs of fear.**

Fear might show itself in physical ways. Children might have shaky hands, they might suck their thumbs or their fingers and they might develop nervous little tics. When this happens, respond to the feelings behind the physical symptoms – fear, insecurity, uncertainty.

- **Something soft and familiar makes the world feel lovelier. It just does.**

Toys or special things might be a familiar passenger wherever your child goes. Let this happen. Your child will let go of the toy or whatever special thing they have when they are ready. Security blankets will often be the bridge between the unknown and familiar, and will form a strong foundation upon which they will build confidence and trust in their own capacity to cope with new and unfamiliar things.

- **Be alive to what they are watching on tv or reading in books.**

If you can, watch their shows with them to understand how they are making sense of what they see. Some kids will handle anything they see, and others will turn it into a brilliant but terrifying nightmare or vivid thoughts that become a little too pushy.

- **Remember they're watching.**

They'll be watching everything you do. If they see you terrified of dogs, it will be easy for them to learn this same response. Remember though, if you can influence their fears, you can influence their courage. Let them see you being brave whenever you can.

- **Validate their fears and let them put word to their fears.**

Let them talk about their fears. The more they can do this, the more they will be able to make sense of the big feelings that don't make any sense to them at all. Talking about feelings connects the literal left side of the brain to the emotional right side of the brain. When there is a strong connection between the right brain and the left brain, children will start to make sense of their experience, rather than being barrelled by big feelings that make no sense to them at all.

- **Acknowledge any brave behaviour.**

Because they'll always love being your hero and it will teach them that they can be their own.

And finally ...

It can always be unsettling when fears come home and throw themselves in your child's way. Often though, fears are a sign that your child is travelling along just as he or she should be. The world can be a confusing place – even for adults. Of course, sometimes fear will lead to a healthy avoidance – snakes, spiders, crossing a busy road. Sometimes though, fear will be a burly imposter that pretends to be scarier than it is.

Fears are proof that your child is learning more about the world, sharpening their minds, expanding their sense of the world and what it means to them, and learning about their own capacity to cope. As they experience more of the world, they will come to figure out for themselves that the things that seem scary aren't so scary after all, and that with time, understanding, and some brave behaviour, they can step bravely through or around anything that might unsteady them along the way.