Why is my child fearful?

Babies and toddlers often develop fears during times of rapid growth, while mastering new skills that bring more independence. At times, their fears are overwhelming. Sometimes what was familiar yesterday may be scary today. Babies might startle when they hear loud noises and may exhibit extraordinary stranger anxiety. Toddlers can suddenly become afraid of the dark, noises, bath time, or of animals as they become more mobile and move away from your protection.

By 2 years old, most children are very engaged in the world of pretend and imagination, and they don’t fully understand the difference between fantasy and reality. Another factor in fearful children can be any recent changes in his world—such as a separation from a loved one, a new baby, a new babysitter, or a recent move. Even things that seem like minor changes can leave a child feeling insecure and more fearful.

Your child’s temperament is also important (see Temperament handout). Children who are more cautious or who get overstimulated easily are more likely to develop fears. If you have a “slow-to-warm” baby, allow time for her to adjust to new people and settings.

Unfortunately, trying to talk to your toddler rationally about why he shouldn’t be afraid often doesn’t work.

What you can do to help console your toddler:

1. Take the time to introduce a new person to your child. This lets her know that this new person is okay: “This is Sherry. She came to visit us today.”
2. Accept toddlers’ fears. Give them words and other ways to express their fears, so that you help them learn to handle their anxiety. “You feel scared of the dog’s barking.”
3. Don’t tease him about the fear (even in good humor), or try to talk him out of it. This can prolong the fear as well as erode his trust in you. Validate and label his 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.”
4. When your child seems fearful of a place or activity, don’t push her into participating. You might help her by joining the activity yourself, or by introducing her to another child who is already participating. You know your child best, and can see how she reacts to new situations.
5. When a child seems fearful, you may be able to distract him with another activity or toy. If you can’t distract him, then just stay with him and be there to offer reassurance.
6. Stay calm when your child shows you that she is afraid. Your own attitude and calm presence are comforting and important to her, even if you are not able to “fix” whatever the fear is.