

# Empowering Young Children: Confronting Fears with Confidence

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## Introduction

Fear is a natural and essential emotion that helps us stay safe in potentially dangerous situations. When our children are small, we have so much control over their environment and the world they are exposed to. But as they grow, their world grows too and our job as parents shifts from protecting them to teaching them how to cope with the real and imaginary fears little children often face.

Young children often grapple with a world full of unfamiliar and sometimes frightening experiences. From the imaginary (and sometimes real) “bad guys” to common fears like the dark or monsters under the bed, it’s essential for parents and caregivers to support them in facing their fears with a sense of empowerment and mastery. In this blog, we’ll explore child-centered techniques that align with developmentally appropriate practices to help children overcome their fears, emphasizing the significance of power play, risky play, and the context of Halloween.

## Acknowledge Their Fears

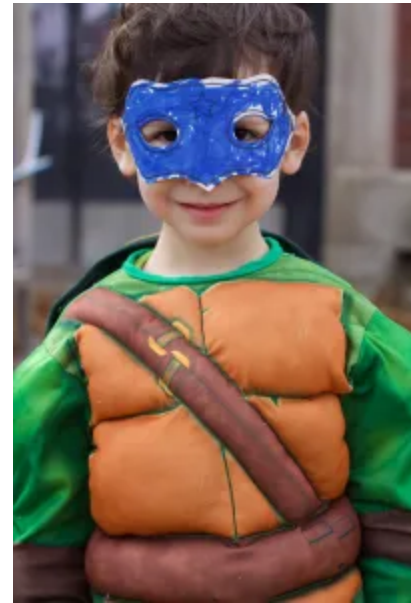
The first step in helping young children confront their fears is to acknowledge and validate those fears. Children’s emotions are real and powerful, even if their fears seem irrational to adults. When a child expresses fear, listen attentively, and empathize with their feelings. Use simple language to convey that you understand their fear and that it’s okay to feel scared sometimes. For example, “I can see that you’re scared of the dark. That’s okay. It’s normal to feel that way sometimes.” Never dismiss a child’s fears as silly, to them it is very real.

## Encourage Power Play

Children often engage in power play to explore their fears and gain a sense of control over them. This can involve pretending to be superheroes, knights, or other powerful characters who can conquer the “bad guys.” Encourage this type of play, as it allows children to process their fears in a safe and creative way. Provide them with props and costumes to enhance their imaginative play and boost their confidence. This is a technique that has become all too real in our house. As a family, we were caught up in the July 4th mass shooting in Highland Park. Our then 3 year old is now 5 and still has many fears from that day. He often plays ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ when playing with his brothers. It can be

hard to watch at times but I have to resist the temptation to distract him from power play and let him process his fears in a way that feels safe to him.

To read more about the role of Power Play in child development try [Pursuing Bad Guys](#) by Donna King and our previous blog on [Rough & Tumble SuperHero Play](#).



## Encourage Risky Play

Risky or adventurous play, such as climbing, jumping, or exploring unfamiliar environments, helps children build confidence and a sense of mastery. While it's crucial to ensure their safety, allowing controlled risky play can be a valuable tool in helping children confront their fears. When children face and overcome physical challenges, they develop resilience and self-assurance that can transfer to other aspects of their lives.

You can read more about [why young children need risky play](#) here and find out more about [how Stepping Stones Nursery School incorporates outdoor play into their curriculum](#).



## Address Common Fears

Common childhood fears, like the dark or monsters, can be addressed through gentle exposure. Gradually introduce children to the source of their fear in a controlled and supportive manner. For example, if a child is afraid of the dark, start by dimming the lights slightly during bedtime and gradually increasing the darkness over time. Provide a nightlight or a comforting stuffed animal to make them feel secure. By doing so, you help them realize that they can manage their fears

and overcome them.

We are bombarded with so many different theories and techniques about what 'good parenting' looks like and sometimes those theories go against our own instincts. Our 5 year old regularly still sleeps in our room. He has developed very real fears from a

traumatic event and staying close to us helps him to feel safe. I am ok with that. I know a lot of parenting experts would tell me to start withdrawing from this sleep routine so that he can sleep independently but that doesn't feel right to me. You do what you need to do to help your family feel safe and secure.

## Halloween and Fears

Halloween can be a particularly challenging time for young children, as it often involves spooky decorations, costumes, and eerie stories. To help children cope with Halloween-related fears, consider these child-centered strategies:

1. **Preview:** Before Halloween, show children pictures of costumes, decorations, and masks. Let them ask questions and express their concerns.
2. **Choice:** Allow children to choose their own costumes. When they have a say in their attire, it can help them feel more in control and less anxious.
3. **Gradual Exposure:** If a child is scared of certain Halloween decorations, gradually introduce them to these items in a controlled manner. For instance, start with less frightening decorations and gradually move to scarier ones.
4. **Empowerment:** Encourage children to participate in Halloween activities like pumpkin carving, which can be a fun and empowering experience.

## Conclusion

Helping young children under five confront their fears is a delicate yet vital task for parents and caregivers. By acknowledging their fears, encouraging power play and risky play, addressing common fears gradually, and confronting Halloween as a fun learning experience, you can empower children to face their fears with confidence. Remember that each child is unique, and the techniques that work best may vary from one child to another. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a supportive and nurturing environment that helps children develop resilience and mastery over their fears, setting them on a path toward a lifetime of self-assuredness.

You can learn more about [Stepping Stones Nursery School's child-centered approach to child care here](#).

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