



He hates when you have to vacuum even more than you do!

# Suddenly Scared

Why intense fears often pop up at this age—and what you can do to calm your toddler.

BY RACHEL RABKIN PECHMAN

**A**round the time my daughter turned 1, she became adamantly opposed to taking a bath—she even got upset by water running when I filled the tub. Our former routine of singing and splashing dissolved into screaming and scratching as Lena desperately tried to get out. No matter what I did, I couldn't seem to alleviate her anxiety. Then, after months of bathtime battles, Lena's fear abruptly disappeared.

It's normal for toddlers to develop all kinds of kooky anxieties around 12 to 15 months, mostly because that's when they start walking, a major milestone that sets off a cascade of cognitive and emotional changes. "For the first time, a child can purposely move away from Mom, from safety, into new situations with a new vantage point, which is exciting as well as scary," explains Heather Wittenberg, Psy.D., creator of babyshrink.com. "It would be similar to suddenly being able to fly as an adult. It would be amazing—but freaky," she says. To help you comfort your kid through this fear-prone time, we spoke to the experts for the best soothing strategies.

## TODDLER FEAR

### The Bath

**WHAT'S BEHIND IT** Your child may feel his equilibrium is off in the tub, and he's worried he might slip—or get sucked down that mysterious drain. Plus, he's separated from you by a big divider.

**OVERCOME IT** Give him a bath in the kitchen sink for a while, as long as he can fit. Turn on the faucet and let your kid get comfortable splashing around as you wipe him down with a washcloth, suggests Dr. Wittenberg. Another technique: As your toddler looks on, run a bath and then start coloring the tub with bath crayons or chatting with a rubber ducky, giving him a funny voice. More often than not, your kid will want to get in and join the fun. You might also make the bath feel safer by hopping in with your child and waiting to drain the tub until later when he is out of the room. If none of these strategies work, cut back on baths—two to three a week should be plenty—and give your child lots of reassurance when he does test the waters.

## TODDLER FEAR

### Loud Noises

**WHAT'S BEHIND IT** As your kid begins to explore the world independently, she'll want as much control over her environment as possible. So a loud noise that she can't immediately identify or stop—like a clap of thunder or an automatic-flush toilet—can be startling.

**OVERCOME IT** "Toddlers are just wise enough to know that there are dangers out there, but not which ones are worth worrying about," says Ellen B. Braaten, Ph.D., a child psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston. "By labeling your child's emotion and the noise, and then reassuring her that it's not a cause for concern, you can take away some of her fear." You might say,

ALEXANDRA GRABLEWSKI, STYLING BY ANNIE NICOLAS FOR ENNIS, INC. GROOMING BY NOELLE HARBINELLI ON BABY ONE-PIECE, ESTELLA NYC, RUG, WESTELIA

"I know you're afraid of that sound, but it's just the vacuum and it won't hurt you." If your little one is talking, give her the language to communicate her fears, says Joseph Campos, Ph.D., a psychologist who conducts infant and toddler research at the University of California-Berkeley. So teach your little one to say "scared" when she's fearful and she'll be able to tell you what's troubling her. When she's calmer, revisit the source of the noise and let out an encouraging laugh. This will help your child connect your positive emotion with what she found so frightening, says Dr. Campos. And until the fear passes, do your best to save tasks like vacuuming or using the blender for when she is out of the room.

**TODDLER FEAR**  
**Animals**

**WHAT'S BEHIND IT** Animals are unpredictable; ones that seem harmless to you (like a butterfly or a cat) can make your kid nervous because they can suddenly flutter or pounce.

**OVERCOME IT** "Once he has settled down, let your child control the situation as much as possible, giving him freedom to see for himself that there is no harm," recommends Dr. Campos. Rather than pushing him to pet your neighbor's poodle, let him watch you give Mr. Boots a rub behind the ears, then approach the dog at his own

pace (as long as it's safe). Offer reassurance as he explores, but give him space to run away if he's had enough for one day. To prevent a problem, tell your child what to expect ahead of time, if you can. If he gets freaked out by birds, you might say, "We're going to the park and we might see some birdies." That way, he won't be surprised when he's confronted with the situation, says Dr. Braaten.

**TODDLER FEAR**  
**Costumed Characters**

**WHAT'S BEHIND IT** Kids base their understanding of the world on the experiences they've had, so when they're confronted with someone like a clown, who looks unusual and has strange facial features, it can be unsettling.

**OVERCOME IT** If you're headed to a birthday party where you know there will be a clown, explain to your child in advance what clowns are and how they usually dress. Then read some books featuring clowns, or do a Google image search so she's familiar with what they look like, Dr. Braaten suggests. If your child gets scared at the party, just reassure her and stay close by. If she wants to leave the room, that's okay too—don't force her to interact. Says Dr. Braaten, "Be relaxed about her fear, don't make it into a big deal, and give it time." □

**Q & A**

**My 22-month-old, who was weaned almost a year ago, constantly grabs my breasts. Why is he still going for them after all this time?**

He's probably craving comfort. If this behavior is new, he may be feeling insecure due to a recent change (such as the departure of a caregiver), and he wants the safe feeling of being snuggled. But if he's been doing it all along, he might merely miss the intimacy of nursing. "Whatever the reason, give him another way to interact," says Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., coauthor of *Breastfeeding Made Simple*. Instead of pushing him away, try saying, "You can't touch me there, but you can rub my arm or my shoulder," and then show him how. If you're calm and consistent, he'll eventually stop.



VICKS® REVOLUTIONARY  
BEHIND EAR THERMOMETER

**CHECK FOR FEVER  
IN JUST  
THREE EASY STEPS.**  
EASY AS 1-2-3



**TURN ON**



**GENTLY PLACE BEHIND EAR**



**PUSH BUTTON AND RELEASE  
WHEN YOU HEAR BEEP**



This product is manufactured by Kaz USA, Inc. under license from The Procter & Gamble Company, Cincinnati, OH USA. VICKS, the shield device, the steam device, and other related trademarks are owned by The Procter & Gamble Company