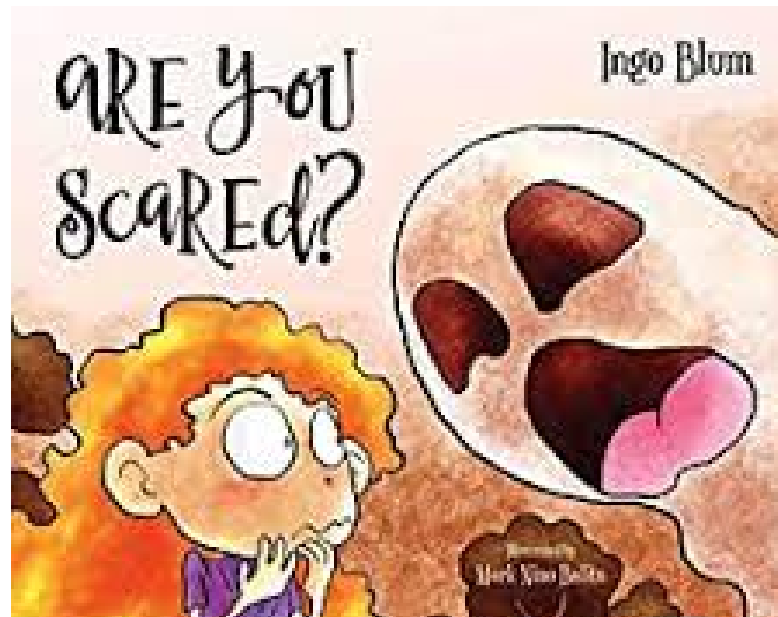


HOW TO HELP CHILDREN MANAGE FEARS

BY <[HTTPS://CHILD MIND.ORG/](https://childmind.org/)>



Fears are an inescapable part of being a human. When these fears rear up, as parents our natural instinct is often to soothe and comfort. There's nothing under the bed, I promise! But, realistically, parents can't — and shouldn't — always be there to help children calm down. Teaching your child how to manage his fears without parental intervention will help him build the confidence and independence he'll need to feel more in control, and less afraid, both now and as he grows up.

So how do we help children start feeling braver? The key is an invisible skill called self-regulation. Self-regulating is essentially the ability to process and manage our own emotions and behaviors in a healthy way. It's what gives us the ability to talk ourselves down or to feel things without acting on them. Most grown-ups practice self-regulation without a second thought. Think of feeling a moment of fear before reassuring yourself that there's really nothing scary about a dark room. But for children, building self-regulation takes time, practice and space to learn — which means parents have get comfortable with letting kids be a little uncomfortable as they figure things out.

Being afraid sometimes is a normal, healthy part of growing up. But for that to happen, parents often have to address their own anxiety first. We want to give kids the chance to practice getting through difficult situations. When you see your child in distress the natural response is to want to make it better, especially if the fix seems like an easy one. But, though jumping in might help your child be less afraid in the moment (and feel better to you), in the long run it can make it more difficult for the child to learn how to calm down. “If children get the message that Mom or Dad will always be there to do the comforting, there isn’t much incentive, or opportunity, to learn how to do it themselves.

Of course this doesn’t mean withdrawing all support. “We’re not talking about suddenly putting your kid in his dark bedroom and saying “Bye! Be brave! See you in the morning! The goal, is to gently guide children along until they’re ready to take the reins themselves. Parents to provide the scaffolding they need to stand on their own.

So, Help your child talk about what’s frightening him/her. Children may know what they’re scared of, but they don’t always have the words to explain. Asking specific questions can help. For example if a child is afraid of dogs you could say, “What makes dogs scary?” “Did a dog surprise you or knock you over?” “Is there a certain dog you’re afraid of?” Once you have a better grasp on what your child is afraid of you’ll have a clearer idea of how to help the child work through it.

Validate, then move on. Once you know what the fear is, let your child know you’re taking it. Once you’ve offered reassurance it’s important to move on quickly We don’t want to dwell on offering comfort around the scary thing, because even that can become reinforcing and take on a life of its own. Instead, start talking about how you’ll work together to help the child start feeling braver and get to the point where she/he’s able to manage the fear by himself/herself.