

ANXIETY AND KIDS: 5 ways to tame monsters under the bed

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Brandie Weikle
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DREAMSTIME
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Whatever keeps your kid up at night, chances are it stems from a healthy imagination.

Is there a bogeyman in your kid's closet? Or does she conclude you've been in a car accident every time you're five minutes late?

Whatever your child fears, chances are good the problem stems from a healthy imagination — and that's not all bad.

There's a link between anxiety and creativity, says child psychologist Dr. Robin Alter, author of new book [Anxiety and the Gift of Imagination](#).

While most kids are able to tell the difference between reality and fantasy, to a child with a vivid imagination the monster under the bed can seem as real as the bed itself, says Alter. The key is to enable anxious children to put that creativity to better use.

Here are some tools to help kids use their imaginations to chase monsters and other worries from their minds:

1 Tell your child imagination is a gift. Not every child is blessed with a great imagination, says Alter. When your child is having fun drawing, creating things or putting on a show, it's enjoyable for everybody. Fears are the flip side of imaginative talent. "If I tell them 'You have an amazing imagination; it's like the Lamborghini of imaginations,' then they feel proud," she says.

2 Emphasize control. Sometimes imaginations can veer into scary territory, and children need to know that theirs can work for or against them. Instead of controlling their minds, anxious children often try to control their circumstances and family instead, she says. That could mean anything from elaborate bedtime routines to fend off monsters, to refusing to go to the pool for fear of drowning. Parents should stress that just as we control our bodies — when we sleep, what we eat, for example — we also need to be in charge of what direction the mind takes. From there, try "graduated exposure" to the source of fear, whether that's a dark bedroom or school bus ride. Over time your child will build faith that nothing catastrophic will happen.

3 Draw it out. Alter likes to get kids to draw pictures of the monsters in their closets or under their beds. "I look at the picture and I go 'Wow, look at this monster you created. This is great. How did you come up with this? Does your monster have a name? Well, name it! It's your monster,'" says Alter. This helps reinforce that the fears are something your child has created. Interestingly, even the kids who keep everyone up all night with their worries don't want to put their monsters — or monster drawings — into the real or proverbial garbage, says Alter.

4 Explore the inner movie. “What goes on in our minds is even more vivid than the movies we see because we’re the main characters,” says Alter. Ask lots of questions to find out what’s occurring in your child’s inner movie during anxious periods; you’ll be amazed at the creativity it takes to make such a complex scenario: “What do you see?” “What are you doing?” “Who else is there?” “What happens next?” With a clear picture of the storyline, you can offer suggestions to steer the plot to a happier conclusion.

5 Remind your child of past successes. Compare taming anxiety to other areas where he’s had to work hard to master something — riding a bike, learning to ski, training a pet, to name a few. This gets across that persistence can pay off with a runaway imagination as well.