



Bedtime Anxiety, Fear of the Dark

For toddlers
18 months to 3 years



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Why This Age Group

Between 18 months and three years, something remarkable happens in your child's brain. Their imagination begins to come alive. The same developmental leap that makes them pretend their banana is a phone and their teddy bear is having tea is also the thing that makes the shadow on the wall look like something unfamiliar and unsettling.

This is completely normal. It is not a sign that something is wrong with your child, and it is not a sign that sleep training has failed. It is simply a stage of growing self-awareness and imagination, and it almost always passes with the right approach.

What we want to avoid is accidentally making it bigger than it is. How we respond to bedtime fear in this age group matters enormously, because toddlers are extraordinarily good at learning which behaviours get a reaction and which ones don't.

Real Fear Versus Protest Escalation

This is probably the most important thing I want to help you understand, because the two things look similar on the surface but need completely different responses.

Some children are naturally more anxious. You will know if yours is one of them, because it shows up in all areas of life, not just bedtime. Genuine fear at bedtime tends to show up physically. Trembling, clutching, a quality of distress in their cry that feels different from their usual protests. Parents almost always know this cry. It has a different texture to it. Trust that instinct.

Protest escalation is something different entirely. It tends to follow a very recognisable pattern, especially in children who have been sleep trained and know how to settle. It starts with water. Then the toy they left in the other room. Then they need the bathroom. Then one more story. And when they've exhausted all of those options and you've calmly addressed each one, fear becomes the final card they play. Particularly if fear has worked before.

Neither of these is your child being naughty or manipulative. But they do need different responses. Genuine fear needs warmth and reassurance. Protest escalation needs calm, consistent boundaries without giving the behaviour more fuel.

The key to telling the difference is your child's overall demeanour, not just that one moment. An anxious child tends to carry that anxiety through the day. It shows up in how they play, how they respond to new situations, how they react to transitions. A child who is protest escalating at bedtime is often perfectly fine up until the moment the lights go out and they realise they want company.



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What's Feeding the Fear

Before addressing the fear itself, it's worth looking at what might be contributing to it in the first place.

Screen time plays a much bigger role than most parents realise in this age group. I recommend no screens for at least two hours before bed for toddlers. Not just because of the blue light effect on melatonin, though that is real, but because of the content. Even shows that seem completely harmless can plant images or ideas in a toddler's mind that they don't have the capacity to process yet. What seems gentle to us can be genuinely stimulating or unsettling for a two year old.

In the lead-up to bedtime, wind-down activities make a real difference. Playing quietly in their room, looking at books, simple calm play rather than high energy interaction sets the tone for what comes next.

Older siblings are worth paying attention to too. Toddlers absorb everything around them, including the games, stories, and conversations of older brothers and sisters. An older sibling's play can introduce fears or ideas a younger child wouldn't have arrived at on their own. This doesn't mean siblings can't play together, it just means being mindful of what's happening in the hour or two before your toddler's bedtime.

Overtiredness is often the silent driver behind bedtime anxiety in this age group. A tired brain is an anxious brain. If bedtime fears seem to be getting worse, it's always worth checking whether your child is going down early enough. An overtired toddler doesn't have the emotional resources to settle into sleep calmly, and small things feel much bigger than they are.

Big feelings from the day also land at bedtime. A difficult moment at nursery, a conflict with a friend, a change in routine, these things don't always surface until the moment the world goes quiet and your child has nothing left to distract them. Bedtime is when the day catches up.

What Not to Do | The Monster Spray Problem

You may have heard of monster spray. Water in a bottle with a reassuring label, spritzed around the room to keep imaginary creatures away. It sounds sweet. I understand the appeal.

But I'd encourage you not to use it, and Dana from Sleep Sense, where I certified agrees.

In my opinion, if the last thing you do before your child goes to sleep is spray away monsters, the last thing they are thinking about is monsters. You have also confirmed, however kindly, that there is something to worry about and that you share their concern about it.

We don't want to dismiss their feelings, and we don't want to validate the fear. The goal is to gently but clearly draw the line between what is real and what is imaginary, in a way that feels warm and safe rather than dismissive.



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How to Respond | The Energy Transfer

Here is the approach I recommend, and it comes from watching what actually works with toddlers in this age group.

When your child expresses fear at bedtime, acknowledge it without amplifying it. Something like: "I hear you. Sometimes it doesn't feel nice lying in the dark, does it?" Validation without drama. You've heard them. You're not dismissing them. And you're also not alarmed, because there's nothing to be alarmed about.

Then redirect. Ask them about their day. "What was the best part of today? What did you have for lunch? What are you looking forward to tomorrow?" The goal is to transfer their energy, gently but deliberately, away from fear and toward something warm and positive. You are not ignoring the fear, you are replacing it with something better to fall asleep thinking about.

This works because toddlers live entirely in the present moment. Their emotions shift quickly when given something new to focus on. You're essentially helping their brain land somewhere safe before sleep comes.

End the routine with warmth and reassurance. "I love you. You are safe. I'll see you in the morning." Short, calm, consistent. The same words every night become their own kind of comfort.

The Nightlight Question

A dim nightlight is completely fine and for genuinely anxious children, genuinely helpful. The key word is dim. Keep it warm toned rather than cool or blue, since blue spectrum light interferes with melatonin production and works against sleep. A small warm glow rather than a bright light is what we're aiming for.

If your child has been sleeping happily in a darker room and has suddenly started requesting a nightlight, that's fine too. Give it to them without fuss. It's a small, practical comfort that costs very little and gives a lot.

Don't Bring Them Into Your Bed

I know this one is hard. Every instinct tells you to just let them in, especially at 2am when everyone is exhausted and you just want everyone to go back to sleep.

But bringing your child into your bed in response to nighttime fear very quickly teaches them that expressing fear gets them exactly what they want, your company through the night. And once that pattern is established it is much harder to undo than the fear itself.

If your child is genuinely distressed, go to them. Sit with them in their room. Offer comfort and warmth. You can lie down with them briefly if they are really in a state. But leave before they fall asleep. Your presence is the reassurance, not your bed.



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When It Might Be More Than a Phase

For most toddlers in this age group, nighttime fears come and go and resolve on their own with consistent, calm handling. But it is worth paying attention if the anxiety is showing up significantly during the day too, if your child seems genuinely distressed beyond the usual developmental range, or if sleep is severely disrupted for an extended period.

If that's the case, a conversation with your paediatrician is a worthwhile next step. In the vast majority of cases you won't need it, but it's always okay to ask.

A Note for Parents

Sometimes bedtime anxiety tells us something about what the day held. Maybe they need a little extra connection. Maybe something happened that they haven't had the words to tell you yet. Maybe they're just overtired and their resources are stretched.

The last few minutes of the bedtime routine are a gift. Sit with them, ask open questions, let them tell you about their day without rushing to the end of it. Not every night will have a big answer. But the habit of ending the day with warmth, reassurance, and your full attention goes a long way toward making the dark feel like something safe rather than something to be afraid of.

They are loved.
They are safe.
And they will sleep.

Shelby