

Fears

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Toni awoke in the dead of night, sprang from her bed and shook her parents from their sleep. She was trembling. She saw something on the floor, in the dark, alongside her bed. Something horrible – a giant rooster’s foot.

If it hadn’t been 4 a.m., Toni’s father would’ve laughed harder than he did. But for three-year-old Toni, this was no joke.

Her mother took Toni to her room to explore. Together they found the rooster’s foot, which, of course, was neither foot nor fowl. It was Toni’s hat, the tall, pointed kind worn by storybook princesses. Toni went back to bed, but needed a little handholding to fall asleep.

Like Toni, young children carry around the potential for a good deal of fear. Among preschoolers, common objects and events can be frightening. Toilets are often the bane of two-year-olds.

One thing parents need to consider when trying to understand children’s fears is children’s size. If you stand only a couple of feet tall, it can be intimidating to watch the helpless whatever in the toilet get swirled and sucked away. It’s not too big of a leap to imagine the next time it could be you.

Three-year-olds often fear dogs and animals. They can’t control what they do. Fear of the dark is common among children ages four and five. They can’t see in the dark and they have a tendency to imagine “things” lurking there, often “things” that can hurt them.

Older children may be afraid of death, imaginary creatures, and creeps that walk the earth for real, such as robbers and burglars. For many it’s a fear of unusual animals, like snakes; natural disasters; or being physically harmed.

Sometimes fear can be a good thing. Some animals are dangerous and children should avoid them. But parents need to help define which fears are reasonable and which are not.

No matter how ridiculous a fear, don’t laugh and don’t tease. Offer comfort and assurances that no harm will come to your child.

Help your child explore the fear. Give a toilet demonstration, for example. Teach your child how to greet a dog, and how it’s best to pet it on the chest and back, rather than its face and eyes. In dark rooms, install a night light, and look under the bed together.

Remember, today these fears are real to your child. In a few years, you both can joke about the rooster foot.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.