

Study offers tips on taming the boogie monster

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Many parents of preschoolers struggle with their children's fears of real and imaginary creatures. A new study offers some ideas on how they can better manage their children's worries.

The study, which was carried out by researchers at the University of California, Davis, appears in the November/December 2009 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers studied about 50 4-, 5-, and 7-year-olds in an effort to identify coping strategies that can be carried out by children. The children listened to a series of short illustrated stories. Each story featured a child alone or with another person who came into contact with something that looked like a real or an imaginary frightening creature, such as a snake or a ghost. Children were asked to predict how intensely afraid each of the children in the stories were, to give a reason why each child felt that way, and to offer a way to help the child in the story feel less afraid.

In situations in which a child's [fear](#) was caused by real creatures, the researchers found, children would rather do something than think positive thoughts. In these situations, boys more often suggested fighting, while [girls](#) more often wanted to avoid the creature.

They also found that between ages 4 and 7, children show more understanding that people's thoughts and beliefs can both cause and reduce fear. While preschoolers tended to suggest pretending the

imaginary creature was friendly, older children tended to suggest reminding themselves what the reality was. Therefore, the researchers say, preschoolers may benefit from seeing things in a more positive light ("Let's pretend the dragon is nice"), while older children may do better when they focus on what's real and what's not ("Dragons aren't real").

"These results should help [parents](#) by reminding them to keep in mind their children's age-appropriate abilities when helping them deal with their fears, particularly fears of imaginary creatures," according to the researchers.

More information: *Child Development*, Vol. 80, Issue 6, Scaring the Monster Away: What [Children](#) Know About Managing Fears of Real and Imaginary Creatures by Sayfan, L, and Lagattuta, KH (University of California, Davis).

Source: Society for Research in [Child Development](#) ([news](#) : [web](#))

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