

How I Helped My Scaredy-Cat Kid: A Parent's Guide to Overcoming Fear

by Courtney Agnello, PassPorter Guest Contributor

My daughter has always been the cautious type. She sleeps with all the lights blazing. Her definition of a thrill ride is a whirl on the carousel. On a bench, please - those horses go up and down pretty fast! Then there's the issue of theme park characters. How about the time she watched a parade at Sesame Place perched on my husband's shoulders? Lovable little Elmo made her so nervous that she threw up on her poor father's head. So when she was five and we decided to make our first trip to Walt Disney World, it occurred to us that she could be the only kid on Earth to hate everything there. How were we going to help her overcome her fears and turn possible nightmares into Magical Moments?

Before Trip Preparation

As they used to say on Saturday morning cartoons, knowledge is power. Long before we left for Orlando we tried to let Katie know what to expect of the different rides, the characters she might meet, and so on. We felt this would help take away the power her fears had over her. We went through guidebooks (PassPorter's KidTips are great), and pored over the list of attractions on the Walt Disney World web site. She let us know her perceived scariness level of each one, which helped us decide some things to definitely delete from our touring plan!

We also watched (many, many times...) the Disney Sing-a-Long Songs DVDs, which were an invaluable - and enjoyable - tool. On these DVDs, kids interact with the characters in the Disney theme parks while singing songs that fit the theme of the show. While still at home, she was able to become familiar with the environment of the Disney parks and see the real-sized characters having fun with kids around her age. Bonus: our family also learned some Disney songs we would not have otherwise known. Now we can "Walk Right Down the Middle of Main Street USA," and sing it to boot.

SPOILER ALERT FOR CHILDREN: We also did something controversial that worked for us, but might not for every family. We decided to fill her in on the "grown-up secret" that the non-speaking characters are really people in costumes. I know this was a risky move! The thought of cartoons come to life was blowing our little girl's very logical mind. We wanted to remove the mystery without ruining the magic. To that end, we treated the concept of the characters the way

we deal with the idea of there being a Santa Claus in every mall at Christmastime. We let her know that while Mickey and his pals are real, they cannot be everywhere at all times to visit with the many children who visit Walt Disney World. They need wonderful helpers who will make their guests feel just as special as they would themselves. She responded so well to this tactic. She was thrilled to be trusted with this extraordinary secret and kept her promise not to spoil the magic for other kids. I have no doubt that knowing about the characters helped her feel more grounded and less fearful around them.

During Our Trip Even with all the groundwork we laid, there were still things at Walt Disney World we had to overcome. It took a day or so of acclimation for her to feel easy around the characters. Luckily, they seemed to sense her feelings immediately and won her over more often than we would have believed. I will never forget our meal at the Crystal Palace, where Piglet signed her book, "To Brave Katie." And then there was a momentous occasion - she hugged Tigger. Yes, I said she hugged Tigger! With everything we did at home to prepare her, she would not have made the progress she did if not for these amazing cast members. I will be forever grateful to them.

There were some other things that caused Katie anxiety besides character contact. The first one was her intense fear of the dark. While we were aware that there are many dimly lit rides, we had no idea of just how many and just how dark they really are! Almost every ride is pitch black at some point. We addressed this by giving her a small, pen-sized flashlight. She was instructed to only shine it inside the car in which she was riding, and only down at her feet. Being able to do this let her have someplace bright to look, and reminded her that she was still in the real world without interfering with the experience of those around her.

Another source of worry for her combined her trepidations regarding both characters and the dark - the stage shows. The Voyage of the Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, the Lion King... all have dark parts and characters galore! We solved this by sitting all the way in the back row. She still didn't like being in the theaters, where she felt a little trapped until the end of the show. However, she used her flashlight in the same way as she did on the rides during the dark parts. She coped as best she could and sometimes that's all one can ask of a five year old, isn't it?

Lessons For Next Time

Now that she is almost eight, she's a little bit older and wiser - more experienced in the world and the ways of Walt Disney World. But she still hates the dark and will not go near a costumed character at a

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birthday party. As we are in the midst of planning this summer's Disney vacation, what lessons from our last visit will help us?

We will definitely bring the penlight. One thing we did not count on last time was the effect of loud noises in some of the attractions and during the fireworks. We are adding earplugs to our packing list. And we are again going over lists of attractions as a refresher. We have found posted videos of many rides on YouTube. We have "ridden" Expedition Everest in our living room almost every day! Speaking of rides, we realized that forcing her to go on something will not mean that she will suddenly enjoy it. We will listen to her more.

For her part, she seems willing to try some new things. Without pressuring her we've begun, shall we say, some subtle convincing... "Test Track only goes as fast as our car, did you know that?" "As a matter of fact, you do not really go anywhere on Soarin' - you just feel like you are part of a giant movie. Isn't that cool?" Even if she doesn't give those a shot, I bet she will at least get off the bench and on to one of those wild horses on Cinderella's Carousel. And that will be a Magical Moment itself.

About The Author: Courtney Agnello is the mother of three. Her articles on several television shows have been featured on pop culture and reality TV web sites. She and her family are counting down the days until their upcoming Walt Disney World vacation.

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