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She Loves Them, She Loves Them Not

Isabel's robot fever ran hot *and* very cold.
by jennifer graham kizer

"Mom, R2-D-to-do can fly, right?"

I get this question from the backseat, where my daughter Isabel, 4, schools her sister Lily, 2, on a certain galaxy far, far away.

"If you say so," I say.

"Yes, Mom, he does!"

So assured in her wisdom, my preschooler. In the rearview mirror, I see her emphatically gesturing, like a politician coached in public speaking.

"Remember?" Isabel presses on. "That bad robot took C-3PO's head and put it on another robot body. R2-D-to-do had to save him. That's when he fled."

The girl's never met an automaton she didn't love—and hate. She hasn't actually seen the *Star Wars* movies (no more than a few scenes, anyway), because robots also terrify her. Instead, she cozies up with her robotic friends from a distance, poring over her trusty *Star Wars: The Visual Dictionary*, and snapping it shut if things get dicey. But still, she loves robots.

Robots weren't the first entity to bring out Isabel's inner split personality. At 2, she came downstairs on Christmas morning only after several minutes of convincing that Santa had really, truly left the premises. But that wasn't so unusual, I figured; lots of kids want the big man in red to just drop the loot and go. Her reaction was more about loving the gifts, hating the giver, and she was over it by age 3.

With robots, it's different. She loves them, ▶





Why Kids Do This

Preschoolers are still learning to discern between reality and fiction.

"It can be unsettling for a child to meet a robot, which is inanimate but has animate properties," says Lawrence Balter, Ph.D., psychology professor at New York University.

And equally unnerving to run into a life-size cartoon figure.

"Suddenly the character's in a theme park and bigger than she is."

Becoming pre-occupied with or even drawn to the object of fear is a healthy attempt to master that fear.

And befriending an imaginary robot is a coping strategy, a way to work through a fear. By fantasizing about this scary thing, a child develops a compartmentalized way of handling it, says Balter. Essentially, she's putting it in its place.



wants them to be near, but simultaneously dreads them. She's been nursing this cocktail of adoration and terror for a few years now, ever since I performed in a children's play at our church that featured a, well, you know. Not quite 3 at the time, Isabel was just getting hip to robots. They're big in preschool popular culture—turning up in the story lines of *Dora the Explorer* and *Hi-5*. When she heard I'd be sharing the stage with a robot, she insisted on coming to the dress rehearsal. I preferred my original plan—leaving her home with her dad.

"Listen, kiddo," I said. "The robot's not real. She's just a nice, metallically dressed lady." But there was no tempering her expectations. Meeting a robot was like climbing into an inflatable moonwalk or sleeping in a bonk bed

(her pronunciation), new and thrilling. So I caved. Off we went to meet the robot.

Let's just say that the sight of my shining, silvery robot cast mate didn't produce the happy smiles I was expecting. It was more like Isabel had come face to face with a slimy swamp monster with an appetite for young children. She buried her face in my legs, then ran for her life.

In this single, wordless moment, robots appeared to lose their luster. I carried my terrified daughter off to the church nursery, and that was that. Or so I thought.

But a funny thing happened on our car ride home—Isabel acquired an imaginary friend. This friend loved the same things Isabel did: ice pops and playgrounds. He had a mommy and a daddy and, like Isabel, had to hold a grown-

up's hand when crossing the street. Isabel chattered on and on about her new pal who was, by the way, a robot.

For the next few days, Robot tagged along—or wanted to. “Robot likes this music,” Isabel declared when our family attended a concert. “But we’ll have to teach Robot how to dance.” She filled me in on plans to visit Robot at his house, where he would offer her green ice pops.

Later that week, I performed in the play; Isabel came with her Sunday school class. I’d spoken to her about the play but hadn’t dwelled on it. Out in the audience, I heard Isabel’s wail. Too frightened to be in the same room with the onstage robot come to life, she was taken out by a nursery volunteer.

And yet later, on the way home, she regaled me with fresh, happy insights about her best pal, Robot. His car color was silver (naturally); his signature drink was apple juice, just like Isabel’s.

“But today you were scared of the robot on stage,” I said.

“Because he’s scary,” Isabel replied. Apparently, she saw no connection between her fear of robots (especially when in close proximity) and her friendship with her easygoing and (this was key) imaginary Robot.

I’d logged time on the playgroup circuit, so I knew the conventional wisdom on imaginary friends: They’re common among preschoolers, no cause for alarm, and even indicative of creative, independent, and sociable kids. But my situation was trickier. What if your daughter’s pretend pal has a terrifying, real-life doppelgänger? My husband Lee and I weren’t wild about encouraging this odd, new fascination. But we agreed that we couldn’t deny the existence of the invisible metal guys—not when Isabel could easily bump into an automated something or other at K-B Toys. (And probably would, since she was drawn to the things.)

Isabel’s contradictory behavior made it hard for me to relate. Sure, I could empathize with

feeling petrified by something. That’s why I skip the live snake exhibits. What I couldn’t fathom was why she wanted to be reminded of robots, let alone befriend one. But as her dad and I are learning fast, little minds work differently than big ones do. Hers does, anyway.

So we indulged her with lots of books. Robots, it turns out, are common protagonists of children’s picture books—right after furry animals and friendly monsters. And when Isabel wants to talk about robots, Lee—reared in the ‘70s, the decade owned and operated by George Lucas—simply draws from his vast reserve of six films’ worth of R2-D2 and C-3PO knowledge. Isabel savors the distant, mythological world full of Good characters battling Evil ones with robots at the heart of things. And it helps that Dad is doing the telling.

Last week, when Isabel turned 4, she announced that she’ll be cleaning up her toys. “Because that’s what 4-year-olds do.” (News flash to tired parents of 3-year-olds.) “And,” she declared, “4-year-olds aren’t afraid of robots.” Her new passion? Darth Vader, who won’t be appearing in any upcoming church plays. ●



Jennifer Graham Kizer, with Isabel and Lily, hopes to add a domestic robot to the family collection.



Parenting the Fear Factor

One mistake parents make in trying to quell fears: focusing on what’s real and what’s pretend. A child already knows what’s pretend, says Marjorie Taylor, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. Instead, help her change the *nature* of the pretending. Suggest that maybe the robot feels lonely because it scares people. Or introduce a baby robot in need of kid protection.

Creative play can also be a foot in the door to understanding your child’s fear. She may show little interest in talking directly about her fears, but while she’s pretending, you can do some gentle prodding. “What does that robot like to do?” “What do you like about him?” And, “What will you do if the robot scares you?”