

DGO RESOURCES — GRADE 3

My Neighbor Totoro

1988 | Written and Directed by Hayao Miyazaki | Runtime: 86 minutes | Rated: G

Primary DGO: DGO 7 — Overcoming Fear, Worry and Paranoia

Supporting DGOs: DGO 1 (Build Self-Responsibility) · DGO 3 (Move Away from Victim Mindset) · DGO 11 (Focusing Their Time on Things That Interest Them)

Where to Watch: Netflix · Amazon Prime Video · Apple TV · English dub recommended for young viewers (Dakota & Elle Fanning)

Content Heads-Up

My Neighbor Totoro is rated G and runs 86 minutes. It is one of the gentlest films ever made and one of the most appropriate for this age group. There is no violence, no language concerns, and no scary content in the conventional sense. The most intense moments are the soot sprites (small black dust creatures that scatter — mildly startling for very young viewers), a nighttime storm sequence, and the emotionally tense search for four-year-old Mei when she goes missing. The search resolves happily.

One scene worth brief preparation: when Mei goes missing, villagers are shown dredging a pond. Attentive children may realise they are looking for a drowned child. The sandal they find turns out not to be Mei's, and she is found safe. If your child notices what the dredging implies, acknowledge it honestly: 'Yes, they were very worried something bad had happened — that is how much the whole community cares about Mei. But she is completely safe.'

Cultural note: a non-sexual family bathing scene shows the father and both daughters in a traditional Japanese soaking tub (ofuro), with bare shoulders, chests, and legs visible. This is a normal bonding practice in Japan with no sexual connotation. A brief explanation before the scene is helpful: 'In Japan, families often bathe together as a way to relax and spend time together. It is a different tradition from ours, but it is about family closeness.'

The film moves at a quiet, contemplative pace very different from most contemporary children's animation. There are long scenes of simply exploring a house, walking through rice paddies, and waiting in the rain. This pacing is intentional and is itself part of the film's argument — that slowing down and paying attention is how you encounter the world's wonder. Younger or more restless viewers may need a brief framing: 'This film moves slowly on purpose, like a quiet walk. See what you notice.'

Why This Film for Overcoming Fear, Worry and Paranoia

Your child's lesson on Overcoming Fear, Worry and Paranoia introduced them to something important: that fear and worry are real, valid responses to genuinely uncertain situations — and that the goal is not to pretend fears away but to develop the internal resources that allow us to feel safe even when outcomes are not guaranteed. This is the distinction that most children's media gets wrong and that *My Neighbor Totoro* gets exactly right.

Satsuki and Mei have real reasons to be afraid. Their mother is in hospital with a serious, unspecified illness. The family has moved to an unfamiliar house. The countryside is full of sounds and shadows they do not recognise. These are not imaginary fears — they are appropriate responses to genuine uncertainty. Hayao Miyazaki, who based the film on his own childhood when his mother was hospitalised for years with spinal tuberculosis, does not pretend that the children's situation is not genuinely difficult. He takes it seriously. And then he shows how children can live fully and wonder-fully within a difficult situation without being consumed by it.

The film's core argument is delivered through its structure: every frightening or uncertain thing turns out to be safe, benign, or wonderful. The soot sprites seem scary — they scatter when light comes and make Satsuki gasp. They are entirely harmless. The old house seems haunted. It becomes their beloved home. The enormous creature sleeping in the camphor tree should, by any conventional logic, be terrifying. He is the gentlest friend imaginable. The Catbus is unnerving — alive, grinning, moving at impossible speed. He carries Satsuki exactly where she needs to go.

This is not a simple message that everything turns out fine. *Totoro* does not cure the mother. The film does not promise that everything will be okay. What it does is something far more valuable: it trains the imagination to hold unknown as potentially wonderful rather than automatically dangerous. The specific cognitive movement DGO 7 is building — away from the assumption that uncertain means threatening — is precisely the movement the film practises across its entire running time. Fear is not absence of information. It is a particular interpretation of absence of information. The film teaches a different interpretation.

Mei is the film's most important teacher for this lesson. At four years old, she has none of Satsuki's protective caution. When she spots a tiny *Totoro* scattering acorns, she follows it. When she finds the enormous *Totoro* asleep in the roots of the camphor tree, she does not run. She lies down on his stomach and falls asleep. She responds to the unknown with pure curiosity and openness — which is the emotional state DGO 7 is pointing toward: not the suppression of fear but the development of genuine trust that the unknown can be approached rather than fled.

Satsuki's journey is the older child's version of the same development. She carries real worry about her mother that Mei cannot fully understand. Watch how Satsuki manages this: not by pretending the fear away but by continuing to be fully present to the world in front of her — exploring the house, caring for Mei, paying attention to what is actually happening rather than to what might happen. Her moments of fear breaking through (when she sees *Totoro* at the bus stop for the first time, genuine awe rather than composed competence) are the film's most honest moments about what healthy anxiety looks like: present, acknowledging, but not paralysing.

DGO 1 — Build Self-Responsibility — is woven through Satsuki's entire arc. In their father's periodic absences and with their mother in hospital, Satsuki takes genuine responsibility for Mei's safety and wellbeing. This self-responsibility is not a burden the film endorses imposing on children — it is shown as a capacity that Satsuki carries with a kind of competent grace that Grade 3 students will recognise and aspire to. The lesson is not 'be responsible because you have to be' but 'taking care of what matters to you is a form of strength.'

DGO 3 — Move Away from Victim Mindset — operates quietly but consistently throughout the film. Satsuki and Mei have genuine hardship: their mother might not recover, their world has been disrupted, their family's future is uncertain. Neither girl collapses into helplessness or self-pity. They explore the new house with wonder. They make friends. They help their father. They engage fully with the life available to them. This is not denial — the film shows Satsuki crying when fear finally breaks through her composure, and this is shown as healthy rather than shameful. Moving away from victim mindset does not mean pretending things are not hard. It means choosing, as much as possible, to engage with what is available rather than with what is absent.

DGO 11 — Focusing Their Time on Things That Interest Them — is Mei's particular gift in the film. Her absolute focus on the acorns she sees falling, on the tiny Totoro she glimpses and follows, on the enormous creature she discovers — this quality of genuine, wholehearted attention to what interests her is both what produces her encounter with Totoro and what the film holds up as a model for how to be in the world. Worried children spend their attention on what might go wrong. Children who are genuinely engaged in what interests them have less attention available for worry. The film is a 86-minute illustration of what that engaged attention looks like in practice.

Six Moments in Totoro That Build DGO 7

My Neighbor Totoro works through accumulation — each encounter with the unknown resolving into safety or wonder rather than danger. This table maps six key moments through the fear or uncertainty present, how the character responds, the DGO 7 mechanism operating, how the moment resolves, and the lesson each moment teaches.

The Moment	The Fear or Worry Present	How the Character Responds	The DGO 7 Mechanism	How It Resolves	The Lesson
The soot sprites in the old house	<i>Satsuki and Mei encounter tiny black creatures that scatter in the dark corners of the old house. They seem like something that should be frightening — dark, numerous,</i>	Satsuki gasps. Mei laughs. Their grandmother explains calmly that the soot sprites are harmless — they leave of their own accord when a family brings light and	The unknown is encountered directly, emotional response acknowledged honestly (the gasp is real), and then information is provided that allows reinterpret	The soot sprites scatter into the forest, having left the house to the new family. They are never seen again as threatening. The girls' wonder about them is	Scary things often turn out to be harmless when you look at them directly rather than imagi

	<i>moving in the dark.</i>	warmth to a house.	tation. The scary thing is explained without being dismissed .	validated without the fear being amplified.	ning what they might be. The imagination of a threat is often worse than the actual thing .
Mei follows the acorns and discovers Totoro	<i>Mei follows a trail of acorns falling from nowhere, crawls through a hole in a bush, and falls into the presence of an enormous sleeping creature. By every conventional children's story logic, this should be terrifying.</i>	Mei approaches the sleeping Totoro with pure curiosity. When he wakes briefly, she notes with delight that his whiskers tickle. She lies down on his stomach and falls asleep with him.	Mei has no prior model of what this creature means — she has not learned to be afraid of it, so she responds with her natural curiosity rather than with learned fear. Her response is the DGO 7 ideal: openness rather than assumption.	When Mei wakes, Totoro is gone and she is alone again. But the encounter was real and benign. She returns to tell her family, who believe her rather than dismissing the experience.	Young children often have natural openness to the unknown that older children and adults have partly learned away. Keeping some of that openness — the willingness to

					approach rather than flee — is a skill worth protecting.
Waiting at the bus stop in the rain	<i>Satsuki and Totoro stand together at the bus stop in the dark and rain, waiting for their father's late bus. Satsuki is aware of Totoro's presence for the first time — enormous, strange, right beside her.</i>	Satsuki carefully shares her umbrella with Totoro. She watches him discover the sound of rain on the umbrella with pure delight. She smiles at his wonder. The fear of the unknown has been replaced by delight at its discovery.	The shared physical space — the small act of offering the umbrella — transforms the encounter from frightening to intimate. Small, practical acts of connection dissolve fear more effectively than reasoning it away.	When the Catbus arrives — alive, grinning, bizarre — Totoro boards it without concern, and his departure feels natural rather than alarming. The Catbus should be terrifying; in this context, it is wonderful.	Fear often dissolves when we take one small practical step toward the thing we are afraid of rather than waiting until we feel completely unafraid before acting.
Satsuki's fear breaks through	<i>The family receives a telegram from the hospital that is ambiguous about</i>	Satsuki cries. She does not pretend to be fine. The film allows her to be	Fear that has been held at bay for a while will eventually need to be acknowledge	The telegram turns out to be about a minor setback, not a	Feeling afraid about something that

ough — at the hospital	<i>the mother's condition. Satsuki, who has been managing her worry with competence and care, breaks into tears on the ride home.</i>	genuinely afraid, genuinely distressed — this is not a failure of the DGO 7 work she has done. It is the honest cost of loving someone.	dged. Satsuki's tears are healthy rather than a sign that she has been doing DGO 7 wrong — they are the natural release that makes continued coping possible.	crisis. But the film does not use the resolution to imply that Satsuki was wrong to be afraid. Her fear was appropriate; the outcome happened to be better than feared.	genuinely matters is not weakness. The goal is not to never feel fear but to be able to continue living, caring, and engaging even while the fear is present.
Mei goes missing — the search	<i>Mei has tried to walk to the hospital alone to bring corn to her mother and has gone missing. The entire community searches. Villagers dredge the pond. Satsuki is terrified for her sister and</i>	Satsuki does not collapse. She finds Totoro and asks for his help — the most direct possible application of the film's lesson: when you need help, seek the help that is available, including help from	The act of going to Totoro — actively seeking help rather than being paralysed by fear — is DGO 7's most advanced demonstration. Satsuki moves through her fear rather than being	The Catbus carries Satsuki to Mei. Mei is safe. The two sisters are then carried to the hospital window to see their mother laughing — the mother's condition has improved, though	When fear is at its most intense, the most effective response is active: seek the help that is available,

	<i>near the edge of her own coping.</i>	unexpected sources.	stopped by it, toward the action that might help.	this is shown rather than announced.	take the next step that might make a difference, keep moving rather than being stopped by what might be wrong.
The ending — Totoro watching from the camphor tree	<i>After the crisis has resolved, Totoro is glimpsed one final time, watching from the great camphor tree as Satsuki and Mei's family is reunited at the hospital. He grins. The family will be okay.</i>	The girls do not run to him or call to him. They simply see him, and the seeing is enough. Totoro does not speak; he does not promise anything. He is simply present — witness to their recovery.	The film ends with the feeling of benevolent presence rather than with explicit reassurance. The world contains kindness, the unknown can be trusted, and something watches over children who pay attention to the world around them.	The mother is laughing; the family is together; the seasons have changed and life continues. Not all of the uncertainty has been resolved — but the capacity to live within it has been developed.	The goal of DGO 7 is not the absence of difficult things but the presence of enough inner resource that difficult things do not destroy the

					capac ity to live fully. Totor o is the film's symp ol for that resou rce.
--	--	--	--	--	--

What Totoro actually provides — and why it is not what most adults would think.

Totoro does not solve any of the family's problems. He does not cure the mother. He does not promise that everything will be fine. He does not appear on demand or provide explanations. What he provides is something adults often underestimate: presence, play, and the assurance that mysterious forces in the world are not necessarily malevolent. Children living with genuine uncertainty — a sick parent, an unstable home, an anxious family atmosphere — often need exactly this and rarely receive it. The adult instinct is to provide information ('the doctor says Mum will be okay'), reassurance ('everything will be fine'), or distraction ('let's think about something else'). Totoro offers none of these. He simply exists — enormous, strange, gentle, real — and the girls' knowledge of his existence is what allows them to feel that the world, despite its uncertainties, is fundamentally safe enough to inhabit. This is closer to what DGO 7 is actually building than any specific coping technique: a deep sense that the unknown can be trusted, that the world contains kindness, and that uncertain does not automatically mean dangerous.

DGO 7 in Your Child's Real World: Five Situations Where Fear, Worry and Paranoia Appear

The skills Satsuki and Mei demonstrate in Totoro are the same skills children aged 8-9 need in their daily lives. Worry at this age often clusters around a few specific situations. The following table maps five common worry situations through how worry typically feels, what unhelpful responses look like, what the Totoro approach does instead, and a practical practice for children.

The Situation	How Worry Feels in This Situation	What Makes It Worse	What the Totoro Approach Does	Practice for Your Child
A family member is sick or	<i>Physical symptoms of anxiety — tummy aches, difficulty sleeping, clinginess,</i>	False promises ('everything will definitely be fine') that the	Acknowledge that the worry is real and appropriate. Provide honest, age-appropri	The 'Right Now' practice : when worry about a

unwell	<i>hypervigilance for signs that things are getting worse. The child monitors the sick person's face constantly for information. Catastrophic imagination fills in gaps that adults have not explained.</i>	child privately doubts and that teach them adults cannot be trusted with real fears. Dismissal ('you don't need to worry about that'). Being excluded from honest age-appropriate information.	te information that leaves less room for catastrophic imagination. Ensure the child has a specific person who will tell them if anything important changes. Help them notice what IS okay right now.	sick family member takes over, help your child name three things that are okay right now — in this moment, today. Not 'everything will be fine' but 'right now, we are together, we had dinner, and Mum/Dad called today.'
Starting something new — school, class, activity	<i>The imagination generates every possible negative outcome before the new experience begins: nobody will like me, I won't be good at it, I'll do something embarrassing, I'll be the only one who doesn't know what to do.</i>	Minimising the child's worry ('you'll be fine, don't be silly'). Providing so many reassurances that the child understands the adult is also anxious about the outcome. Allowing avoidance, which	Acknowledge that new things feel uncertain and uncertain can feel uncomfortable. Share a specific moment from your own experience of starting something new and managing the discomfort. Help the child identify one specific small first step rather than	The 'First Five Minutes' practice: tell your child that the only job for the first five minutes of any new experience is to pay attention to

		teaches the imagination that the new thing was indeed dangerous.	the whole experience.	what is actually happening — not to what might happen. Like Mei following the acorns: just this next thing, right in front of you.
Darkness, night time, and being alone	<i>At bedtime, the imagination that has been occupied during the day now has space to generate threats. Darkness means unknown; unknown means potentially dangerous. Sounds become threatening; shadows become shapes; the familiar becomes unfamiliar.</i>	Telling children their fear is irrational ('there's nothing there, you're being silly'). Leaving them alone with the fear before any coping resource has been established. Allowing electronic screens right before bed, which overstimulate the imagination rather than settling it.	Approach the dark with curiosity rather than avoidance — what is actually in the room? Not imagined threats but real objects: the chair, the bookshelf, the window. The soot sprites became less frightening when seen clearly rather than imagined. The same is true of most nighttime fears.	The 'What Is Actually There' practice : at bedtime , help your child name five real things they can see in their room. Not 'there's nothing scary' (dismissal) but 'there is your bookshelf, your bear, your door, your curtains, the light from the

				hall.' What is real and known reduces what is imagined and feared.
Conflict with friends — social worry	<i>Social worry at Grade 3 is often about belonging: Will my friends still like me? Did I do something wrong? Are they talking about me? This worry can feel more urgent than almost any other because at this age, peer belonging is genuinely important to wellbeing.</i>	Encouraging the child to obsessively review social interactions looking for evidence of rejection. Dismissing social worry as trivial. Solving the social problem for the child rather than helping them develop the capacity to navigate it themselves.	Like Satsuki taking one small practical step toward Totoro rather than being paralysed by his strangeness, social worry is most effectively addressed by one small direct action: say hello, include the person who might be upset, ask the question directly rather than catastrophising.	The 'One Small Step' practice : when your child is worried about a friend's hip, help them identify the single smallest action that might help — not a solution to the whole problem but one small direct move toward it. Worry grows when we stay still. It often shrinks when we take one step.
Something	<i>Some children at Grade 3</i>	Trying to argue	Mei's pure engagement	The 'Totoro

bad might happen — general anxiety	<i>develop a more general vigilance — a sense that something bad might happen without a specific object. This feels like a constant, low-level alert state that is exhausting and that can make it hard to enjoy experiences that are actually good.</i>	children out of the worry with evidence that nothing bad is happening. Providing so much reassurance that the reassurance itself becomes a coping mechanism that the child becomes dependent on. Avoiding all risk, which teaches the child that the world is indeed dangerous.	with what is in front of her — following the acorn, touching the whiskers, lying down on the warm stomach — is the film's model for the specific antidote to generalised worry: genuine absorption in the present moment. Worried children are living in possible futures. Present engagement returns them to the actual now.	Noticing' practice : at a calm moment each day, take two minutes to notice something genuinely interesting in the immediate environment — something you haven't noticed before, or something ordinarily seen closely for the first time. Like Mei following the acorns: what is actually here, right now, worth following?
--	---	--	--	--

What to Watch For

My Neighbor Totoro is a film that rewards repeated viewing — children who have seen it before will notice details in Miyazaki's extraordinarily rich backgrounds that they missed the first time. These notes focus on the moments most connected to DGO 7, and are written for the parent to use as quiet anchors during the first viewing rather than as prompts to pause and explain.

The arrival at the new house — the unknown as adventure, not threat.

Watch how Miyazaki frames the girls' arrival at the old house. The house is clearly strange — it creaks, it is overgrown, it has a camphor tree so enormous it seems supernatural. Satsuki and Mei's response is not caution but delight: they run through every room, they discover the soot sprites, they call excitedly to each other. The unknown house is approached as a space of discovery rather than danger. Miyazaki is deliberate about this framing from the film's first minutes: the girls' natural response to the unknown is curiosity, and the film rewards that response consistently. Notice this as a DGO 7 choice: the film has established its emotional contract with the audience in the opening ten minutes.

Mei finding Totoro — pure openness.

Watch Mei's first Totoro encounter as the film's most important single sequence for DGO 7. She follows the tiny Totoros purely because they interest her — there is no caution, no hesitation, no calculation of risk. When she falls into the presence of the enormous Totoro, she registers him with delight rather than terror. She pokes his face to feel his fur. She notes that his whiskers tickle. She falls asleep on his stomach. This sequence is the film's fullest statement of its thesis: pure curious openness to the unknown produces wonder rather than harm. Point this out to your child after the film: 'What did Mei do when she found Totoro? What do you think you would have done?'

The bus stop in the rain — one small act of connection.

The bus stop scene is one of the most beloved in all of Miyazaki's work, and its DGO 7 mechanism is worth noticing. Satsuki is clearly in awe of Totoro — she has not yet had Mei's fearless encounter with him. But she does one small thing: she offers him the umbrella. That one small practical act of connection — not conquering her awe, not pretending it away, just doing one small thing despite it — transforms the encounter. Watch Totoro discover the sound of rain on the umbrella: his delight is as genuine as a child's, and Satsuki's smile when she sees it is the moment her awe becomes affection. This is the DGO 7 practice in its most distilled form: not waiting until you feel completely unafraid before acting, but taking one small step toward the thing that worries or awes you.

Satsuki crying — fear acknowledged, not suppressed.

Watch carefully the scene after the family receives the ambiguous telegram from the hospital. Satsuki, who has been extraordinary — competent, caring, managing Mei, managing her own fear — breaks down. She cries. This is not a failure of the film's DGO 7 argument. It is its most honest moment. The film is telling you that the goal is not to stop feeling fear but to be able to continue functioning, caring, and engaging while the fear is present — and that when the fear finally breaks through, that too is okay. It is normal. It is healthy. It means you have been carrying something real. Point this out to your child after the film: 'Why do you think Satsuki cried in that scene? Had she been scared before that moment?'

Satsuki asking Totoro for help — active response to fear.

When Mei goes missing, watch how Satsuki responds to her terror: she goes to find Totoro. She does not collapse, she does not wait for her father (who is unreachable), she does not simply search alone. She goes to the source of help she knows is available. This is the film's most important DGO 7 lesson for Grade 3 students: when fear is at its most intense, the most useful response is an active one. Not pretending the fear away. Not being paralysed by it. But taking the specific action that might help. Satsuki's run to the camphor tree, her desperate climb, her plea to Totoro — these are not the actions of a fearless person. They are the actions of a frightened person who knows how to act despite being frightened.

Family Discussion Questions

These questions are designed for Grade 3 students (ages 8-9). They are warm and accessible, pitched for conversation between parent and child rather than academic analysis. The best discussions start from one or two questions and follow where the conversation leads — your child's connections and observations will often be more interesting than the question itself.

1. Why do you think Mei wasn't scared of Totoro the first time she met him, when most people would be?

BUILDS: CURIOSITY AND OPENNESS

This question gets at the film's central DGO 7 insight: Mei's fearlessness comes not from knowing that Totoro is safe (she doesn't know this) but from approaching the unknown with curiosity rather than assumption. She has not yet learned to be afraid of enormous unknown creatures. She simply sees something interesting and follows it. Grade 3 students will have interesting things to say about why younger children are sometimes braver than older ones — and the best discussion will gently note that some of Mei's approach is worth keeping even as we get older.

"If you found a giant mysterious creature sleeping under a tree, what do you think you would do? What would make you feel brave enough to get closer?"

2. Totoro doesn't fix Satsuki and Mei's problems — their mum is still in hospital at the end of the film. So what does he actually do for them?

BUILDS: UNDERSTANDING WHAT HELPS WITH WORRY

This is the film's most important question for DGO 7 and the one children will find most genuinely interesting to think about. Totoro provides presence rather than solutions. He makes the world feel safe enough to inhabit even when outcomes are uncertain. He demonstrates that strange and unknown things can be benevolent rather than threatening. For Grade 3 students, the discussion naturally opens into 'what makes you feel better when you are

worried?' — and the best answers will often not be solutions to the worry but forms of presence, connection, and engagement.

"When you feel worried about something, what actually helps? Is it someone fixing the problem, or is it sometimes something else — like being with someone, or doing something you love, or just knowing someone is nearby?"

3. Satsuki manages to look after Mei and keep things running even when she is really scared inside. How does she do that?

BUILDS: DGO 1 — SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

This question opens the DGO 1 connection. Satsuki is genuinely frightened about her mother and genuinely burdened by her caretaking responsibilities — she is not pretending everything is fine. But she continues to act: making meals, taking Mei to school, managing the house. The discussion should acknowledge that this is genuinely hard and that Satsuki deserves admiration for it — while also exploring what helps her do it. Her relationship with Mei, her father's consistent warmth, and ultimately Totoro's presence all support her self-responsibility rather than replacing it.

"Have you ever had to keep going and do your part even when you were worried or scared? What helped you do it?"

4. The soot sprites seem scary at first — but they are completely harmless. Can you think of something that seemed scary and then turned out to be okay when you looked more closely?

BUILDS: REFRAMING THE UNKNOWN

This question asks Grade 3 students to apply the film's core DGO 7 structure to their own experience. The pattern — scary-looking thing turns out to be harmless when seen directly — is repeated five times in the film, and the discussion will work best when the child generates their own examples rather than being given the film's examples. The most common answers at this age: darkness and nighttime fears, new situations (first day, new activity), unfamiliar animals, unfamiliar people.

"What made you think it was scary before you looked more closely? And what changed when you actually experienced it?"

5. When Satsuki and Mei tell their dad about Totoro, he believes them completely. He even thanks the forest spirits for looking after his daughters. How does the dad's reaction affect how Satsuki and Mei feel about their experience?

BUILDS: THE ROLE OF BEING BELIEVED

This question opens one of the film's quietest but most important DGO 7 arguments: children whose experiences are validated by trusted adults develop more secure relationships with their own perceptions. Satsuki and Mei are not told 'that was just your imagination' — they are believed, and their encounter is treated as real and significant. The father's response models how adults can support DGO 7 development: not dismissing children's experiences, not amplifying their fears, but taking their perceptions seriously and responding with warmth rather than correction.

"How would the film be different if their dad had said 'that's just your imagination' when they told him about Totoro? How do you think Satsuki and Mei would have felt?"

6. Mei follows the acorns even though she has no idea where they are coming from. What is the difference between following something curious and doing something dangerous?

BUILDS: DGO 11 — CURIOSITY AND INTEREST

This question addresses the DGO 11 connection and opens up an important conversation for Grade 3 students about the difference between healthy curiosity and reckless behaviour. Mei is following something genuinely interesting with no prior evidence that it is dangerous. This is different from ignoring known risks. The conversation should affirm curiosity — following genuine interest is valuable, and the film rewards it — while also noting that what Mei does is different from, say, following a stranger. The distinction the film implicitly makes: following what interests you is different from ignoring what you know to be risky.

"What is something you have been curious about recently — something you would like to follow like Mei followed the acorns? What would you need to feel safe enough to explore it?"

7. Satsuki cries when she is scared for her mum. Is crying the same as giving up?

BUILDS: HEALTHY EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

This question addresses the relationship between expressing fear and being controlled by it — one of the most practically important DGO 7 distinctions for Grade 3 students. Satsuki's tears are not weakness — they are the healthy release of fear that has been held appropriately for a long time. After she cries, she keeps going. The discussion should affirm crying as a form of genuine emotional processing rather than as failure — and should help children distinguish between expressing a difficult feeling (healthy) and being stopped by it (the goal of DGO 7 is to prevent this).

"What happens in your body when you are very worried about something? Is it better to let it out or to keep it inside? What happens after you let it out?"

8. When Mei is missing and Satsuki is terrified, she doesn't just stand still — she goes to find Totoro and ask for help. What can we learn from that?

BUILDS: ACTIVE RESPONSE TO FEAR

This question targets the film's most important DGO 7 action lesson: when fear is most intense, taking one specific active step is more useful than being paralysed by the fear or waiting until the fear goes away. Satsuki is not unafraid when she goes to find Totoro — she is absolutely terrified. She acts despite being terrified. The discussion should explore what Satsuki does and why, and then connect it to the child's own experience of times when they acted despite being afraid.

"Have you ever had to do something even though you were scared? What helped you take that first step? And how did you feel after you took it?"

9. Totoro just grins, roars, and waits at bus stops in the rain. He never explains anything. Why is he comforting even though he doesn't say anything?

BUILDS: PRESENCE AND SAFETY WITHOUT EXPLANATION

This question opens a genuinely philosophical conversation that Grade 3 children are surprisingly capable of having. Totoro's comfort comes from presence and benevolence rather than from information or reassurance. He cannot explain the mother's illness. He cannot promise everything will be fine. But knowing he exists — that something enormous and gentle is watching the camphor tree — makes the world feel safer. This parallels the experience many children have with trusted adults, beloved pets, or meaningful places: the comfort is not in the content of reassurance but in the presence itself.

"Is there a place, or a person, or even an object that makes you feel safer without needing to say anything? What is it about that thing that helps?"

10. If you could ask Totoro one question, what would it be?

BUILDS: IMAGINATION AND CONNECTION

This final question is the guide's invitation to pure imaginative engagement — the same quality of attention the film itself models and that DGO 7 ultimately builds toward: a relationship with the world that is curious, open, and unafraid of the unknown. There is no analytical goal here. The question simply asks children to place themselves in relationship with the film's central character, which is itself the DGO 7 practice: approaching the mysterious with a question rather than with fear.

"And what do you think Totoro's answer might sound like — even though he doesn't use words?"

Bonus: The Totoro Walk

The Totoro Walk is a simple family practice that directly extends the film's DGO 7 lesson into everyday life. It takes between fifteen minutes and an hour, requires no equipment, and works for children aged 5 to adult.

1. **Choose a familiar place.** A garden, a park, a familiar street — somewhere your child knows reasonably well. Familiarity is part of the exercise: the goal is to find what has not been noticed in a familiar place, like Totoro hiding in the camphor tree that the family drives past every day.
2. **Move slowly.** Walk at half your normal pace. Miyazaki's films move slowly on purpose — the pace itself is how you notice things. Tell your child you are walking at 'Totoro speed.' No phones, no destinations, no time pressure.
3. **Follow what interests you.** Like Mei following the acorns, let the walk be driven by genuine curiosity rather than a route. If your child is interested in a spider web, stop at the spider web. If they want to look at the bark of a tree for two minutes, look at the bark of a tree for two minutes. The destination is whatever genuinely interests them.
4. **Name what you find.** At the end of the walk, or during it, name three things you found that you had not noticed before. Not three things you were looking for — three things that surprised you by being there. Like the soot sprites: they were always there; the family just had not looked before.

The Totoro Walk is a physical practice of the cognitive movement DGO 7 is building: from 'the unknown is potentially threatening' to 'the unknown is potentially wonderful.' It requires nothing except the willingness to slow down and pay attention — which is, ultimately, what Totoro himself provides. Miyazaki made a film about this quality of attention because he believes, correctly, that it is one of the most important things childhood can develop. The walk is a way of making that development a regular, unhurried, joyful practice.

Parents' Note

My Neighbor Totoro is rated G and is among the gentlest, safest, and most emotionally nourishing films available for young children. Studio Ghibli films are made with the understanding that children are capable of genuine emotional depth and that they do not need their stories sanitised — only made with love. This film has that quality in abundance. It is an exceptional choice for family viewing at any age above five, and it is among the most effective DGO 7 films available for the specific reason that it works through immersion rather than instruction.

Why this film rather than something more obviously about overcoming fear. Many films aimed at helping children with fear, worry and anxiety address the topic directly — the character is afraid, the character learns to be brave, the character is no longer afraid. Totoro's approach is different and more effective: it builds the emotional environment in which DGO 7 development naturally occurs rather than demonstrating the endpoint of the development. Children who watch Totoro do not learn 'the lesson' about facing their fears. They spend 86 minutes inhabiting an emotional state in which the unknown is trustworthy, the world is

benevolent, and genuine engagement with what is present produces more comfort than anxious anticipation of what might go wrong. This is the state DGO 7 is trying to build, and the film builds it directly rather than describing it.

On the film for children dealing with family illness. Miyazaki made this film as a direct processing of his own childhood experience of a mother in long-term hospitalisation. For children whose family is currently dealing with a parent or close relative's illness, Totoro offers something extraordinarily rare: a story that takes the genuine difficulty seriously, that does not resolve it with a false promise, and that demonstrates children's capacity to live fully and wonder-fully even within that difficulty. If your family is in this situation, the film is worth watching with the explicit framing that the mother's illness in the film is real and serious and unresolved — and that Satsuki and Mei are still okay, still loved, still finding wonder in the world.

The bathing scene. As noted in the Content Heads-Up, the ofuro scene shows non-sexual family nudity in a Japanese cultural context. A brief explanation before the scene is all that is needed: 'In Japan, families often bathe together as a way to relax and spend time together — it is their version of a cosy family tradition.' Grade 3 students are generally untroubled by this once the cultural context is briefly provided.

Studio Ghibli as a curriculum. My Neighbor Totoro is typically the ideal first Miyazaki film for young children. If your child responds well to it, Kiki's Delivery Service (ages 7+) offers a beautiful exploration of DGO 2 (Develop Personal Power) and DGO 14 (Develop a New Sense of Optimism), while Spirited Away (ages 9+) is the most complete available Ghibli exploration of DGO 5 (Raise Consciousness Above the Collective) and DGO 8 (Not Being Controlled By Others). Princess Mononoke (ages 13+) addresses DGO 26 (Move Past Conformity and Group Identity) with extraordinary depth. The Ghibli catalogue is, in many ways, an accidental DGO curriculum.