

The Lucy Daniels Center for Early Childhood

Award winning childhood education, childhood mental health, and adult education center

Halloween: An Opportunity for Growth

Halloween is a challenging holiday, particularly for the younger child. It is a magical time when children vacillate between excitement and over-excitement, pleasure and fear. Parents have a special opportunity to help children use their Halloween experiences for positive growth by understanding the holiday from children's inner perspective.

The traditions of Halloween are especially transfixing and mystifying for children who are under six years of age. They must respond to many strange experiences: walking around their neighborhood or mall in the evening, going up to strangers' homes that might be decorated in a spooky way, and receiving candy and "fusses" about their costume from strangers (whom they are otherwise coached to avoid). Parents can protect their child from becoming overwhelmed by these experiences by keeping things simple for their children, such as going only to a few familiar homes, walking them to the door, and explaining things to their child as they are happening.

There is a very special pleasure associated with the trick-or-treat ritual. Children spend most of their lives with the grown-ups calling the shots, knowing the most, and doing what children sometimes perceive to be unfair things. In other words, the grown-ups are "playing tricks": the trick of having to clean up because mom says so, or the trick of having to eat spaghetti when you would rather have peanut butter! But, on this glorious day, the child reigns, fooling the grown-ups from behind a costume, and obtaining candy just for asking without saying "please"! How children delight at not being recognized by their neighbors! Furthermore, many children will dress as a sort of super-grown-up, such as a hero, monster, or star. The tradition of going house-to-house is a valuable one, and trick-or-treating with children three years and older in the neighborhood or at friends' homes can create wonderful memories, if handled with appropriate attention to the young child's needs.

The costumes of Halloween pose special challenges for children. Costumes can scare and confuse young children because they are still learning that people cannot "magically" change. For this one evening, a child's world is peopled with individuals who may have previously only existed as made-up characters in books or movies, and who also may be strange and unsettling. For example, there is this horrible Dracula man who

has blood dripping out of his funny teeth. There is this mean-seeming and horrible woman with a black hat.

Parents can teach their child about masks by gently and, with verbal preparation and the child's permission, putting on a non-scary mask in front of them. It would be helpful if the child can inspect the mask before the parent puts it on. While behind the mask, parents can remind their child that they are still mommy or daddy. Parents should be careful to not keep the mask on very long. Also children under four years of age may derive pleasure and a sense of mastery from wearing a mask, but may become overwhelmed if they wear the mask for more than a minute or so, especially the first few times that they wear it.

Many children want to dress up in costumes of larger-than-life figures who are more powerful than mere mortals and certainly more powerful than mere children. Children especially want to wear the costumes of the powerful on Halloween night when they may confront so many scary activities and creatures. Parents can help shape their child's efforts to identify with these powerful figures by guiding their child toward costumes of super-heroes or fictional characters who use power constructively.

On the other hand, parents should not encourage a child six years and younger to wear a scary mask, or acquiesce to their wishes to do so. When parents allow a child to wear the costume of a scary or bad character, (because it seems harmless or because the child is relentless), parents may be trying to master their own (possibly forgotten) feelings of being scared. It is entirely normal for parents to occasionally work out, through their relationships with their children, old scary situations that still live within them, and for well-meaning parents to unwittingly justify these repetitions as harmless or in the child's interest. Nevertheless, parents have the responsibility to try to notice and interrupt these repetitions, for they are not to a child's benefit. In a similar way, parents need to protect their child from adults who do other kinds of scary things, such as tell scary stories, wear scary masks, or from scary Halloween places such as community haunted houses or neighborhood houses that are decorated in a scary way.

Parents can assist young children by acting as buffers, limiting the excitement and shielding against the fearfulness. Simple explanations about what is real and not real are important. Perhaps the most important way to master Halloween – *and any fearful situation* – is by helping the child to find ways to overcome or master anxiety by engaging in constructive solutions and activities.

Parents can help the child with active mastery by making the Halloween costume with their child. In addition to the intrinsic value of such a parent-child activity, children who create a costume have the opportunity to learn "in their fingers" that costumes are truly made up. Parents can find other joint projects, such as mastering the odd scary creatures of Halloween by making pumpkins into odd but funny and lovable creatures.

Mastery of anxiety can also be achieved through learning and exploration. For example, teachers will often build upon a child's interests to develop curricular units that will enable the children to meet anxiety with knowledge. One class may study spiders and yet another might read books that explain about monsters being pretend. These sorts of activities can be pursued at home.

Adequate preparation provides another source of active mastery. Parents can assist their children by repeatedly reminding them about what they can expect on Halloween, and reminding them of the expectable sequence as they progress through the day. Another form of helpful preparation would be to role play Halloween for a child, which might include practicing getting dressed and even trick-or-treating with a prepared neighbor before actually doing it on Halloween itself.

Children often love to make up or hear their parents tell "scary" Halloween stories. These are also ways for parents to feel that the scariness is within their control. Parents can use a child's scary stories to help them learn that the first responsibility of a good story-teller is to keep the feelings of their listener in mind. So, they must not scare their friends or their younger siblings! They will learn this from their parents' deeds as they choose stories and activities that are sensitive to how easily children can become overwhelmed and confused by scary stories, decorations, and costumes.

Halloween is a challenge which, when successfully met, is an opportunity. So, on Halloween night, be with your child; help your child to keep the evening simple and understandable; explain and comfort; and make your Halloween night an opportunity for psychological growth from a challenge met together by parent and child.