

Mommy, There's a Ghost Out There

Helping Young Children Enjoy the Rituals of Halloween

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Many childhood memories are built upon traditions like Halloween. At school, children talk about Halloween costumes and what they plan to be. Older children also talk about Halloween, but talk often seems to center around trying to scare one another. All of this talk is part of a social ritual that helps children to belong, to learn the natural give and take of conversations, and to gain mastery over their fears.

Parents often spend inordinate amounts of time trying to create the perfect costume for their child. Instead, remember that it's the ritual of talking to your child about the costume, of your child talking about his costume at school before Halloween that is important. Thinking about the fun of Trick or Treating itself is what your child will remember rather than having had the very best costume ever created.

How to help your children with normal fears of "scary" things

Encouraging your preschool child to play pretend games with you can be a bonding activity that also helps them to gain mastery over their fears. Before Halloween you can, for example, pretend to be your neighbor's big dog. You can also have your children play with face makeup with you. As your child watches, ask her if you should put on a doggie nose and some whiskers as you "bark" in a friendly way. If your child wants to try the makeup also, make sure she watches in a mirror as you put it on her. Let your child set the pace, so that if, at any stage, your child wants you to stop, do so.

- **Remember that your child should participate in the decision about what he wants to be.** After all, the costume choice should be the child's fantasy, not ours as parents. Some suggestions of fun costumes that are fun but not frightening are Pooh, Raggedy Ann, Firefighters, and Harry Potter.
- **Young children are often afraid of people wearing masks.** Some parents have suggested leaving a scary mask lying around before Halloween. By doing so, the child can ignore the mask, play with it, ignore it again, put it on himself, ask mom or dad to put it on, and become used to it. As children play with a mask, they are playing with and gaining mastery over their fears.
- **Masks are hard for children to wear,** since they obscure vision, are hot, and often keep sliding down their faces. They are also an all-or-none proposition for children, so that if they decide they don't want to wear it, a significant part of their costume is gone. Face makeup is far more comfortable to wear, and the child usually feels more free to enjoy the Halloween festivities. Remember though, that on Halloween, young children still have fun even if their costume has no mask or face makeup.
- **Older kids often seem to try to scare themselves.** This kind of play is usually an attempt to master their own fears. One author suggested that the scary Halloween

stories parents (the oldest kids of all!) share with one another about tainted candy is actually the parents' attempts at mastering their own fears.

Remember that responding to your child's need to cling builds a sense of security and trust. Your child can be more brave and less clingy if he can trust that any time he needs a "booster" of protection (being held or "shielded" from a scary goblin), he can get it. If you don't respond to those clingy fears, the child will actually cling more because he can never be sure when he will be able to have that need fulfilled. Don't be embarrassed by your child clinging, as many young children hold their parent's hand or are carried for the entire Trick or Treat expedition. As your child grows, he will gain confidence and naturally venture farther.