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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Keeping Halloween Emotionally Safe**

Halloween - that magical time where children are poised between excitement and over-excitement, pleasure and fear. It is in many ways the most challenging holiday for parents. Halloween offers parents a familiar challenge and opportunity: How can we make an experience a growth-enhancing one for a child?

Lucy Daniels Center recommends that we solve these challenges through understanding the inner experience and perspective of a young child. What does Halloween mean to a 3-year-old? a 4-year-old? a 5-year-old? Halloween is certainly a most mysterious time - mysterious in wonderful ways. For example, we take pumpkins and for some strange reason carve them up and make them into funny looking faces. There is so much opportunity in the carving for fun with Mom and Dad, and for learning how to safely use carving instruments. Parents have an opportunity to teach their child how much they value their artistic vision. The most beautiful pumpkins of all are those crooked ones that come from the unschooled touch of a child, invested with love by his or her Mom and Dad.

For the 3-year-old child, Halloween night can be quite a challenge. So many new experiences are occurring together. The child is walking around the neighborhood or mall at night with strangers in strange costumes walking by, while walking up to strangers' houses. People that the child does not know are giving him or her wonderful things and making a fuss over them. In many ways, the candy is the least of the over-stimulation! The excitement of the child is a mixture of pleasure and fear. For the younger child, three and four, parents should try to keep the experience simple so that the child can experience the pleasure and less have the confusion and fear. They should consider going to relatively few homes and familiar ones at that. They should walk to the door with their child, explaining things as they go along. If there

are strange noises, or scary costumes, parents should remind their child over and over that there are children under those masks, that the scary faces are not real.

Children who are five and over can tolerate a bigger dose of Halloween night. And, they can understand the special pleasure of the trick or treat ritual. What is this special pleasure? Children live with the grown-ups calling the shots, with the grown-ups knowing more than they do, with "tricks" being played on you all of the time. Not mean tricks, unless they are in a problematic situation, but the trick of having to clean up because Mom says so, the trick of having to eat spaghetti when you would rather have peanut butter. So, for once, on this glorious day, the child reigns. The grown-ups are the ones fooled by not knowing who is behind the costume, or, by being scared by the ghoulish visitor. How children delight at not being recognized by their neighbors! Going house-to-house has this valuable pleasure for children, and they can obtain this moment in the sun if parents feel safe in your neighborhood or can arrange with some friends a special tour of each other's homes.

Halloween is a very mysterious time for a child in other ways as well. Suddenly, the child's world is peopled with individuals that they may have never or only rarely heard about. There is this Dracula thing that looks horrible and has blood dripping out of its funny teeth, for some totally unexplainable reason. There are these people that wear black hats and look horrible and in some way do mean things. Is it any wonder that so many children want to be super-heroes at a time like this? It is not such a bad idea to be invincible - if you are scared enough!

3-year-old children are not quite sure yet whether people and things can "magically" change. Even five and six year olds do not have this confidently figured out yet. Nor, for that matter do adults: don't all good actors and actresses tell us that they need a bit of time to return from their character to themselves? What this means is that our young children can be easily scared and confused by Halloween masks and costumes. Parents can teach children about masks by gently putting on a non-scary mask in front of them, and quickly taking it off. Talking and reminding the child that Mom is still herself or Dad is still himself as they have the mask on will also help the child. If parents are ever tempted to scare a child with a mask, they should remind ourselves that they may be inflicting on the child a scare that they endured

as a child - and, as human beings do, rationalizing it as fun. It's a hard truth, but all parents are susceptible to repeating unpleasant experiences of their having been the victim; in the repetition, parents become the mean monster, scaring their child and insisting that it is just fun. The best antidote for such repetition is to try to remember what it really felt like to be a child, helplessly being done to.

So, how can parents respond to a child who wants to wear a scary Halloween costume? First, parents should remember that children learn who they are partly through whom they pretend to be. A child cannot wear a Dracula costume without coming away from the experience feeling that they are, at least in a tiny way, a Dracula kind of child. When a young child wears one of these costumes, they are scared themselves by what they are becoming. Clearly, this is never acceptable, and for that reason, there is no place whatsoever for costumes that are associated with scary, evil, destructive, or sadistic creatures. There is no justification for Darth Vader, Dracula, or werewolves.

Witches are a more ambiguous call. Although witches portrayed in many folklore accounts as sadistic and destructive, a child often sees them as being more mischievous than sadistic. For that reason, while certainly not figures of constructive power, they are at least not frankly destructive or sadistic in the minds of most children. Parents should listen to how their child experiences such ambiguous costumes; if the figures are benign to him or her, then it is an emotionally safe costume for a child to wear.

Figures that represent power used in a more constructive way are certainly more acceptable. Superman, Batman and Spiderman are examples of such characters. After all, many children want to dress up in costumes of larger than life figures that are more powerful than mere mortals and certainly mere children. Parents have the responsibility to guide children to identify with figures who use their power in constructive and positive ways.

Probably the best choice of costuming is for parents to be creative and make their own. Making a costume can be easier than many parents think, and are a very rewarding project for parent and child. Creating a costume is the best way for a child to learn that a costume is truly made up! And, parents will then be able to move beyond the limited and often aggression laden choices that are available commercially.

Parents can assist 3-year-old children with the fearfulness and overwhelmingness of Halloween by acting as buffers, limiting the excitement, shielding against the fearfulness. Simple explanations about what is real and not real are important. But perhaps the best way to master Halloween - and any fearful situation - is by finding ways to actively overcome. When a child manages his fear of monsters by becoming the feared monster on Halloween night (or for the week before), this is an illustration of the child turning a passive situation of being scared into an active situation of being scary. How can parents constructively use this capacity of children to turn the passive into active and thereby conquer fears? One important way is to encourage learning and exploration. Halloween is filled with images of scary spiders; children can learn about spiders through a variety of activities. Instead of passively absorbing the frightening mythologies about spiders that Halloween brings, children can actively learn the truth about spiders, including the scary part. With such learning, children are better equipped to live in a world that really does contain spiders! Making up stories about Halloween is another way for children to learn that the scariness is within their control. It is important to remember that when children make up stories that are scary, parents can help them to learn that the first responsibility of a good storyteller is to keep the feelings of their listener in mind. So, they must not scare their friends or their younger siblings! They can learn this caringness from parents as they choose stories and activities that are sensitive to how easily young children can become overwhelmed and confused by scary and spooky stories, decorations and costumes.

Parents often attribute the excitement that overwhelms a child on Halloween to an excess dose of sugar. Whether sugar effects a child in such a way is still controversial, but it is very clear that what most overwhelms a child is the fear and confusion of the Halloween night. And, most children, when afraid and confused, will become wild. So, on Halloween night, we recommend that parents stay with their child, help their child to keep the evening more simple and understandable, explain and comfort, and make the Halloween night an evening of psychological growth from a challenge successfully met by parent and child together.