



## **Helping Children With Monster Fears**

Young children frequently develop fears of monsters. Children don't think about monsters in the same way that adults do. To a child, a monster is a real something, whether person or creature, that intends to harm that child or other family members. Children as young as two years of age may develop monster fears. Parents are often baffled as to the origin of these monster fears as well as by the relative ineffectiveness of their reassurances that monsters are pretend and the child is safe. Why does child after child fear terrible creatures? And what do these monsters mean to children?

**Why monsters?:** Children create monsters because all children have personal experiences that convince them that people can behave destructively toward other people. There are two kinds of experiences that bring this lesson to young children. The first type, which only some children have, is the direct observation that people can be overtly hurtful. Perhaps a child witnesses or is the recipient of physical or hurtful verbal aggression. It is important to keep in mind that children may interpret parental aggression to mean that adults can be destructive even if the adults are not intentionally hurtful or cruel. For example, some children may experience corporal punishment to mean that their kind parents have the potential to turn into scary and dangerous people. (This is one reason that we recommend against using corporal punishment.) As another illustration, because children age five and under do not fully understand the distinction between pretend and reality, they may respond to dangerous villains in a video as if they were real. Young children's successful emotional development will be supported – and monster fears minimized – if they are protected as much as possible from exposure to overt aggression or hurting.

The second type of experience, occurring for every child, takes place

whenever a child observes angry feelings inside himself or herself. Sometimes a child's anger can be quite intense – temper tantrums illustrate just how strong these feelings can become. All children experience angry feelings because anger and aggressive thoughts are a basic psychological response to any distress or painful situation such as disappointment, frustration, loneliness, boredom, physical pain, and anxiety.

Young children are often frightened by their anger. They are scared that they might lose control of that anger and hurt loved ones and/or get punished. Furthermore, because young children often believe that parents can read their minds, children worry about how their parents would react if they knew about their aggressive and angry thoughts.

These fears strongly motivate children to achieve control over their anger and corresponding aggression. One important way that children develop this self-control is through using the emotionally self-protective mechanism known as "externalization." Externalization refers to the remarkable and normal capacity of children (and adults) to create the illusion that their own unwanted feelings belong to something else rather than themselves.

Externalization of aggression helps children feel more comfortable with themselves, because they feel as if they are free of the aggression. The disadvantage of externalization is that the aggression does not really go away. Children become afraid of the aggression and destruction that now seems to lurk around them: There are suddenly monsters out there! Therefore, children's fear of monsters is fueled by an entirely appropriate fear of their own aggression, and, in some cases, may be reinforced by scary life experiences.

Children's externalization of aggression provides them with a respite during which they can develop the confidence and tools to control, channel, and tame their aggression. Children who develop such mastery of their aggression tend to feel the least like monsters, have the fewest fears, and are most able to channel their aggression to achieve constructive goals.

Here are some ways parents can help their child feel stronger than the monsters. The single most important way is for parents to demonstrate that they feel stronger than the monsters! A parent's secure calmness and

lovingness will convey more than specific words could ever convey. Parents should also communicate their belief that their child can also be stronger than the monsters. Parents can do this by encouraging their child to actively fight the monsters. A child's active participation will support his or her mastery. Perhaps a parent can have an air spray that makes monsters disappear; children can use the monster spray at bedtime during a monster hunt. Other helpful strategies include:

- Monster stop signs around the room made by a child;
- Lights on (because monsters hate light!);
- Mommy's mean face at the monsters;
- Practice during the day calling Mommy for help during the night if he or she becomes too afraid.

**Why now?** Although it is common for a child to develop fears of monsters, it may be helpful to understand why the fear has emerged at a particular point. If such an understanding can be achieved, parents may be able to change a situation or provide some specific support that will decrease the extent of children's externalized anger and thereby decrease the strength of their fear of monsters. Children may benefit from such support because they are either experiencing greater anger or a diminished ability to cope with their anger. Children's level of anger increases, as previously mentioned, in response to emotional or physical pain or distress. Such distressing events include the arrival of a new sibling, a move to a new house, a parent who is feeling blue, a parent who is away on a trip, a grandparent who is sick or dying, an increase in childcare hours beyond the child's current capacity to tolerate comfortably, or a particularly frightening experience. Children's ability to cope with anger may diminish when their resources are already being taxed for other reasons, such as because they are tired, ill, or confronting new challenges such as beginning school.

A parent's understanding of the basis of their child's fears, their provision of protection against the experience of excessive aggression, and their support of the child's active mastery will assist their child to master aggression and to develop healthy self-esteem and self-reliance.