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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Taming Monsters With Imagination

Young children frequently are disturbed by the idea that monsters are around. Halloween is a time that these worries are liable to be bigger, but monsters don't just appear in a child's thoughts at Halloween. The monsters are only figments of a child's vivid imagination - why are they so scary?

Learning about pretend: Children, particularly those 6 and younger, are still working hard on learning the difference between what is real and what is pretend or imaginary. We adults have long ago worked out the differences between real and pretend — or have we? Every night we enter the world of dreams where we respond to whatever we see as if it were real, no matter how fantastical.

Even when awake, we may see a movie or read a book and react emotionally as if it were real, even though we know better. Perhaps we have a fear of heights, or snakes, and even the picture of a high bridge or snake may bring about fear. At these moments adults experience the world that a young child lives in all the time, a world in which pretend things, whether they are physical objects, words or thoughts, never feel fully pretend.

The most important thing to know about monsters is that children believe in them because they recognize the presence within themselves of aggressions that they honestly acknowledge and must face and overcome to become kind and caring children and adults.

Children believe in monsters because they know that monster thoughts are real, and their natural anxiety about these thoughts results in their being frightened by images that bring to life their awareness that monstrous

thoughts are real.

Distinguish pretend from reality: It is important for young children to progress in their ability to distinguish between real and pretend. Children's ability to engage in imaginative play depends upon their comfort distinguishing pretend from reality. Children cannot play comfortably and productively if they feel they are in real danger when they begin to imagine bad guys or witches. In such situations, children either avoid the imaginative play or become excited and wild.

Similarly, some children avoid monsters in the toy store. Some are drawn to them and desperately want the costume. But these children are equally scared; they use different coping styles to deal with their anxiety.

Since imaginative play is a crucial support of children's emotional growth in early childhood, helping children distinguish between real and pretend assists their core emotional growth. Children must learn that monsters do not really exist and monster thoughts are just thoughts: pretend.

Parents should help children imagine all sorts of things as they simultaneously provide the protection that enables children to develop a sense that the imaginary is truly pretend. Young children can find this middle ground more easily with written words, or stories, than they might with visual images, such as videos. This is why children can grow in their imaginative capacities from hearing parents read fairy tales, often fairly graphic, whereas they may be frightened by watching less graphic video images that nevertheless seem so real that they overwhelm children.

Homes in which children are excessively stimulated or over-exposed also can interfere with children's ability to learn how to distinguish between their own thoughts about aggression and their own bodily feelings and what actually occurs, leading to problems in their ability to differentiate between real and pretend.

Help with Halloween Monsters: Keeping this in mind, it is helpful for parents to protect their children from the confusion young children feel when they see monster images around them at Halloween. The first strategy is to avoid the monsters, but as parents know, around Halloween, the world may have a

monster around every corner, or so it seems. So parents should keep their eyes open, and when they see a monster or scary figure that their child has also seen, they should comment on it.

A parent's comfort, or even humor, will convey more than lots of explanations. A parent might even touch the monster saying, "You can't scare me. You are just paper and paint." Some children will take comfort in their parent's evident lack of anxiety, although others might be frightened about what they see as their parent's lack of good sense!

Perhaps a parent can find a mask that is not a scary one, or even some hand puppets, and put them on. Better yet, parents can encourage their child to put them on. This would give parents a vocabulary that might feel safe to their child, and they could accordingly describe the monsters as big masks or big puppets.

Parents might look for a book or two about costumes and masks and read those to their child, using them as opportunities to continue the discussion about pretend costumes and pictures. Fred Rogers is helpful and developmentally appropriate in his *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* TV shows and videos, teaching in many ways the difference between real and pretend.

Monsters will not go away — from our culture or from our internal worlds. Parents need to find that middle ground, protecting children from excessive stimulation and confusion and helping them understand that thoughts and imagination are in the realm of pretend and fully within our power to make real — or not.