

TRICK OR TREAT? HALLOWEEN FOR KIDS IN CARE

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October is the month when children have fun with fear! All over the land youngsters will visit “haunted houses”, and will find them boring unless they manage to stir up a good fright. Of course, if they are too scary, that will not be fun either. The goal of this “managed” confrontation with fear is to attempt to face fear in a way that can be handled: scary, but manageable. For most children, this is probably a very healthy activity, since one cannot live life without ever being afraid. So it usually won’t hurt to get some practice with it. And controlled fear is not quite as scary as real fear, so it’s like riding fear with training wheels compared to riding with only your own balance to keep you safe.

By the time all children are old enough to dress up in scary costumes and take chances with Halloween frights, they have already experienced real fear and found it very unnerving. In this sense, children and adults are really no different. Fear makes children of all of us! Fear is experienced in the first minute of life outside the womb, and the customary response can be heard in birthing rooms everywhere. From its’ cozy, warm, dark, predictable place inside, the baby is pushed and pulled into a very different world, and the first response is to scream. For adults, going into an unpredictable and unknown “world” or experience still causes a scream, at least internally. Listen to people of all ages riding a roller coaster! When working in Child and Youth Care it is important to remember your own experiences of fear in order to better understand your clients.

One of the most challenging tasks in our work is to “give up” our notion about “kids”. Our kids are not like other kids. Many of our kids have been frightened all their lives. Their homes were unpredictable at best, and downright violent and scary at worst. Our kids have been separated from their families, their friends, their neighborhoods and schools, and all of the predictable elements of their lives. Our kids already know all about fear. Our traumatized kids know not only fear, but terror: Real terror – not contrived, phony, momentary terror.

So this month presents adults in treatment situations with tasks quite different from coming up with Halloween costumes and going around trick and treating. This month requires us to talk openly with our children and teens about the role fear has played in their lives. It is important for them to know that we understand that their

lives, and therefore every single “holiday” they encounter, will be different from well-tended children. They are not being uncooperative; they are showing us who they are.

Fear is the emotion that sends us a distress signal that we are in some kind of danger. It is one of the most “primitive” feelings a living being can have. The threat can be real or imagined, but the body responds with a terrifying “gut” response in either case. The state of apprehension created by fear screams for relief - hence the giddy and often boisterous response when we realize that we are safe and can stop being afraid – the end of the roller coaster ride!

Fear stirs up very deep feelings of vulnerability, for everyone – adults and young people. Why, then, do children deliberately seek out those experiences of terror, panic, threat, horror, alarm, trepidation, worry, etc? Why would anyone? Perhaps, since by nature the feeling of fear is usually a signal that we are out of control, there is something tantalizing about seeing if we can put ourselves in a kind of “controlled danger”. For most kids, watching a scary movie is tolerable because they know it’s a movie and will end. Some of our children have to be protected from scary movies because their fear did not end. It requires a lot of discretion and conversation among staff to decide which movies to have our children watch, and to be careful that we are right next to them if we approve some “scary” films.

Well treated young people often “flirt” with fear, such as going under a blanket or in a tent and having an adult tell **Ghost stories!!!** For children who have not had to live in fear, faces will be covered, fearful sounds will be uttered, bodies will tremble.....and a great time will be had! I’m afraid I’m going to have bad dreams, they say;let’s do it again! Can the next story be even scarier than the last? Our kids are not afraid of “ghosts”, but of real people.

When dealing with disturbing feelings, everyone faces the challenge of how much responsibility to take for facing and fixing their own feelings, and when and how to reach out to others for help. Seeking the “right” combination of self-help and help from others is life-long. When riding a “scary” ride at the amusement park we engage in self-control activities (close our eyes, giggle, talk to ourselves) and simultaneously grab the person next to us! Three year olds do it at the fun house, fifty-three year olds do it in the hospital. We want our kids to know they do not have to live with their fears alone. We understand and will be here to help.

Halloween gives us in treatment roles a chance to help children both understand and handle difficult emotions, and fear is certainly one of the most difficult.

Being afraid at Halloween can be “fun”, but being afraid in a situation in which we have no control, is very unnerving. It is up to us to let our clients know we take their fears and worries seriously, and know how brave they had to be in their very own homes. Halloween is a perfect day to make every effort to relieve them of fear, to reassure them that they are safe with us, and to invite them to share their stories with us, and even with each other. Peers can provide empathy.

Halloween gives kids chance to “practice” dealing with fear: go ahead and get scared, but, I’m standing by if you need to hold on. And if you’d rather not participate in this particular holiday, I understand totally and we’ll find something else fun to do. Let’s go get candy and forget the scary stuff!

It is more of a challenge for CYC’s to help their children distinguish between normal and unavoidable fears, and those that can create damage. Some fears are brief and immediately forgotten, like a loud noise or a scary Halloween mask. Others can be lasting and deeply injurious. It’s okay to watch a scary movie with your friend; it’s not okay to deliberately cause another child to be afraid. An overly stern or harsh parent can create fear of authority that can cripple a child’s ability to function successfully with other authority issues. Fear of punishment for unavoidable childhood incidents - spilling, dirt, mistakes etc. can seriously undermine the growth of positive self-esteem. Anything that causes a child to fear withdrawal of love will be an unbearable worry. It’s a delicate balance help our children learn to deal with frightening situations, but always being careful not to produce unnecessary situations that create fear. Being afraid to make mistakes can cause children to become paralyzed- unwilling to try anything new or take even reasonable risks. Being afraid of rejection promotes fear that undermines being authentic and true to one’s self.

Feeling afraid of being alone in the dark at bedtime is common - and even well treated children cannot be persuaded there is nothing to fear. Halloween may stir up feelings of fear and terror from the past. Ridicule or sternness only makes it harder to face the fear. Scolding a child for being afraid causes him/her to feel ashamed and guilty, both of which undermine self-confidence. For abused and/or neglected children, fear of the dark is based in real life dangers. Bedtime is hard for them. Anyone facing fear needs softness, reassurance, approval and confidence building. Soft music. A night light. Affection helps us overcome the insecurity that is the basis for many fears.

So use the ghosts and goblins of Halloween to expose your children to manageable fear, if they’re up for it, so they can test their safety and security with the comfort

of knowing you are right there. But they may need time and reassurance. Remind them that strong soldiers coming back from war get scared easily. It's because of their experiences, not because they're weak.

The primary antidote for fear is inner-security. It is a "trick" to ignore the real fears that our children have experienced. Let's **treat** them to the reassurance that we are here to comfort and protect them. If they are willing to "flirt" with some time-limited fear, do it with them. Combining a little fear with a lot of love and protection will make it a HAPPY HALLOWEEN!