What's Too Scary?

As Halloween approaches, Marilou Hyson, PhD, former associate executive director at NAEYC, talks about young children's fears. Much of Marilou's research and writing has focused on early childhood emotional development.

What is too scary for children at different ages?

Each child is different, so it's difficult to give hard and fast rules about what may be overwhelming for all children at different ages. The most important thing a grownup can do is to know an individual child and watch for her reactions to potentially scary images and situations. Pay attention to what she seems very worried about, avoids, or talks about, which can be clues that something is scary. Parents are often surprised by what frightens their child.

Why is there a tradition of scary characters in books for young children?

Many of those stories are traditional fairy tales or legends that originally were created for adults--certainly not for *very* young children. Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales are often very frightening, even for older children. The characters and events in many of these stories tap into some of our deepest childhood fears, such as losing our parents or having someone familiar change into a threatening stranger. Young children have a hard time distinguishing between a change in a person's appearance and a change in who they really are underneath. For example, when a parent becomes very angry, a young child may wonder, *Is that my same mom or is it really someone different?* The answers are not clear-cut to young children.

Why do some children find it fun to be scared just a little?

It's different for each child. When a child plays peekaboo of sorts with something he finds scary, it's great for her to feel she can manage her fear. Mom puts on a mask (but not a terrifying one) and takes it off, or the child does so herself. The child peeks around the corner at a sort of scary Halloween display, but only from a distance. It's important that adults not make fun of children's fears no matter how irrational they seem. And saying "There is nothing to be afraid of" is not real persuasive to a young child.

This speaks to the development of emotion regulation. Gradually, especially within warm relationships and with our support, children begin to be able to manage their emotional reactions to various situations (including Halloween stuff). Adult support could be talking or drawing about what the child is scared of or worried about, helping him or her know what to expect (for example, at a Halloween party), or using puppets to act out a story in which a child is a little bit scared of something and then figures out how to deal with it. There are children's picture books with that kind of theme as well.

Sometimes parents think it's their job to remove all stress from children's lives, but the truth is that, with our support, small bits of stress (child-size bits) are important sources of positive development, as children broaden their toolkit of coping strategies.

Any special tips about handling fears related to Halloween?

Halloween has become a kind of adult holiday (which was not at all true a few generations ago), and with adults and teens dressing up as figures from horror movies and going to extremes to scare other adults (a harder task than scaring a little kid), we need to make sure there is a firm line against violent/bloody/gory and generally horrific images. Not just because they are "too scary" but because they do not represent the values or images that we want our children to be exposed to.

Pretend play is children's main way of making sense of their world. Through play, children can master fears and difficult experiences by reinventing them in a playful way. If Halloween can be another opportunity for children to engage in well-supported pretend play, then it has the potential to support children's development.