

## Monsters in the Closet: Easing Children's Fears

During Halloween you see lots of zombies and monsters in the streets, something that can be fun for many children, but frightening for others. Many young children imagine there are scary creatures hiding in the closet or under the bed even when it's not Halloween. If your child has those fears, how should you respond? And how can you tell if your child's fears are beyond what is typical? Here is Marti's advice on how to deal with children's fears, not only at Halloween, but all year long:

### I. Underlying issues

- For many reasons, young children get frightened when they're alone, especially at night and in the dark. They often imagine all sorts of scary creatures in the closet or under the bed. Very young children cannot separate reality from fantasy, and when they can't see what's around them, their vivid imaginations go to work.
- The scary decorations and costumes of Halloween can feed those fears, as can frightening images that surround our children in TV and movies. These images are not all fantasy; actual news stories of children being harmed erode the security of children of all ages.
- It also is common for ordinary stress and anxiety to bubble up at night; when children can't name what's making them uneasy, it may come out as fear of imagined creatures – and greater vulnerability to the scary images of Halloween.

### II. Tips for parents

- Keep very young children away from scary images, if possible  
*If they do see scary images (in a neighbor's yard, for example), show them in daylight, letting them see and feel the artificiality of the objects. Demystify them!*
- Take your child's fears seriously, but don't overreact.  
*It's important not to dismiss or ridicule feelings. Listen and reflect feelings back to children with words, "I can see you're really scared." Being able to name feelings helps child manage them.*
- Help your child gradually master fears  
*It's never wise to force a child to confront fearful things, but rather to encourage the child through talk and role play to master fears. For example, encourage your child to pretend to be the monster that he or she is afraid of. Have your child draw a scary picture or make a mask. Or have your child pretend to be a parent, reassuring his stuffed animal or doll that there's no need to be frightened.*
- Remember your childhood and see through your child's eyes  
*What used to frighten you? What did you find comforting at those times? As with so many aspects of parenting, our own childhood memories often yield the best information on how to care for our children.*
- If your child's fears are extreme, interfere with sleep or the ability to play and learn during the day, seek professional help