



## EP: 15 Please Don't Scare the Little Ones at Halloween

[00:00:00]

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Are you interested in knowing your child in a whole new way? Understanding what's really going on in their developing mind? Does your child say or do things that make you stop and wonder, where did that come from? Well, welcome to the Hidden Language of Children Podcast, where we explore child development and all the stuff that can make raising kids such a challenge.

I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, clinical director at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio, where we help families guide children to understanding and managing their feelings so that they can become the boss of themselves. This podcast is your window into that world.

So the smell of pumpkin spice is in the air.

The TV schedule is filled with horror movies. People are decorating their yards with giant skeletons and blowup ghosts, which all means we are officially [00:01:00] into spooky season. Today my guest is Anita Eddie, and we are going to talk about Halloween and scary fun. Anita is a longtime clinical social worker and therapist here at the Hanna Perkins Center.

This is her second appearance on the Hidden Language of Children. Welcome back Anita.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Thank you, Kim.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** It is great to have you here. You and I have had conversations about this issue numerous times over the years, and I think I'm really excited that we're going to now share our conversation with the larger world. So. To get us started in this conversation, let's talk about spooky fun. Why is it so popular in the first place?

What draws people towards scary kinds of entertainment?



**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Well, the first thing I was thinking as you introduced the topic is excitement. And excitement is something that [00:02:00] can be neutral for some people. Can be over the top for some people. It be scary, but looks like it's really fun for some people. There's lots of different ways people experience excitement.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** I agree and I wonder sometimes if part of it is mastery over scary things, right? Like instead of being surprised by scary things, we become the thing that is scary.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** And in that way we become, at least in our minds, we become the boss of the scary instead of the ones who are being scared.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Yes,

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Right.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** And so just to add to that, there's a developmental element to that. So if you're thinking about, I don't know, 12 months to 3 years old, the scary and surprising excitement is going to be a little different from somebody 5, 6, or even into adolescence. I think [00:03:00] people and parents, caregivers need to think about what's going on with the child developmentally before you introduce things are hard to integrate or difficult to understand or never been seen before, or as you said earlier, connected to maybe an earlier surprise or excitement that the child might have had that they are aware of. Sometimes parents aren't quite aware what things frighten, scare and surprise children.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Yeah, and one of the things I know you and I have both talked about is this idea that as an adult you don't remember your very early childhood. And so sometimes when you have fond memories of Halloween, or you have fond memories of birthday parties, you are really remembering back to when you were, let's say six or seven or eight, and we can [00:04:00] super-impose that onto a much younger child.

And I've had parents say well, I always loved Halloween. Did you? As far back as you can remember, you remember Halloween. But in those first five years, we



don't carry those memories with us. And so we have to remember that our child is not a reflection of us. They are their own little human beings.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** And those first five years, let's talk about the separation between fantasy and reality and how that impacts Halloween.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Reality testing is one of those developmental lines that we talk about. So we do have those various ideas about what develops when, and reality testing is something that takes longer than some people believe. Along those lines, many things that are introduced to children challenge their reality testing [00:05:00] all the time.

I want, I don't want to name any particular things, but some movie characters, some childhood books that children are reading, cartoons all assume that children actually know the difference between what's real and what's not real.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** OK, let us be really straightforward. You take a child who's three years old to Disneyland and they meet Mickey Mouse. In their minds, they are meeting the real Mickey Mouse.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Correct.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** And so then when it comes to Halloween, if mom or dad put on a scary mask because that's what they're used to doing for Halloween and they have fun with it, you become that monster to

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** yes.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** a 3-year-old.

They, it's not, they're a 3-year-old, is really not in a place to say you are wearing a mask. And so when they dress up as Buzz Lightyear, they become [00:06:00] Buzz Lightyear and that can be a fun thing. But parents have to be aware that at that age, the child is not making a separation between fantasy and reality.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Correct.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Do you agree?



**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Yes, I do.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Yeah.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** One thing I think I can give some credit to parents of today. They have stopped taking their children from house to house and they have a trunk or treat with people that are familiar to the children, familiar to parents. Maybe sometimes they decorate the car is a little scary, but the idea is that they're attempting to protect their child from something that could be overwhelming or scary. So I have to give them credit for trunk or treat. It's a good idea.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** So let's talk about why we don't always like a very small child to go up to somebody's house and knock on the door for trick or treat.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** The [00:07:00] very basic message is that we give children all the time is don't engage with strangers. So if you tell them not to engage with a stranger, and then you have them go up to a stranger's house ask for candy, that's a mixed message. Very blunt, mixed message.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** I, I had a 3-year-old teach me this lesson, I don't even know how many years ago it is now, where they had a very hard time with bedtime post Halloween, right? They went out they dressed up as nothing particularly scary, but they got dressed up and they went out. And after that, they had a very hard time with bedtime.

And when we got down to it, what the child thought was that this is what grownups do every night. After you, after children go to bed. And it was just this one night that the child was allowed to go outside and partake in this. And so the child thought that Halloween was every night. And I think it was [00:08:00] such an interesting example of the decisions that children make in their heads without input from adults.

And we make the assumption that they know that it's a special holiday or that they know that these things aren't real and our take-home message is, no, they don't. We don't know what they think unless we ask.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Yeah. It leads them to believe that what they believe is what children believe, and they can't make that separation



unless they're in feeling touch with their children. Then they understand that maybe children may generalize, I think is what you're saying.

They generalize this one night to every night instead of making the distinction – because they're not ready to do it, just not there yet.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** And it's candy.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Yeah.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Yeah, it gets candy, right? OK, so that's the downside, right? Let's, we're going to be very specific as we talk about Halloween. We're really [00:09:00] saying under the age of ... what?... we recommend, that Halloween is handled in very small, bearable bits, right?

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Five? Except you do need to consider the child's emotional development because one 5-year-old may not be the same as the other. So it could five, or maybe six, sometimes seven. The parent has to figure that out. Just a very soft, small fall harvest celebration. It's just as fun or maybe more fun than a scary Halloween that children have a hard time integrating.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Which is really the test of, let's just say it's the test of where they are with reality testing, right? Their relationship to costume. And their relationship to – we could talk about a lot of other holidays – it's really hard to say Halloween isn't real and these characters aren't real, and the cartoons aren't real.

And then we can talk about [00:10:00] the tooth fairy, which we want children to say is real.

And I think that can be confusing for a lot of children. And so we prefer reality testing and I think that sometimes the sadness that parents feel over the loss of the holiday when we make these kinds of recommendations is not really it's not really the child's loss.

It's what, as a parent, what fantasy did you have that you're disappointed in? And even when they do turn six and they have a good sense of it do we recommend scary costumes?



**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** I would not recommend a scary costume. Again, it's not as fun as parents think they are. And I know there's a lot of scary things on television that children may seem to be enjoying, but maybe having an opposite feeling inside. Sometimes they want to [00:11:00] live up to their parents' expectations, I think. And if it's meant to be fun, then I must have fun doing it – for fear of disappointing their parents.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Or Yeah. Or for fear of the vulnerability of admitting they're scared.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Thank you. Bingo.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Both of those things, right?

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Yes.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Yeah.

And again, you and I both agree that the best thing you can do is have conversations with your kids. So let's say you do have a 5-year-old and who's asking a ton of questions about Halloween.

What do you think are the important things for parents to know to have good, solid conversations with their kids that support reality testing, but also being able to have a good time.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** I think I would start with the idea that Halloween is not celebrated by everyone. And so as a family they can decide [00:12:00] whether or not they want to do that. Also have a straightforward conversation about how scary it is and have children be able to share their feelings

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**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** Then I would add when your child is older – say six, seven – begin to introduce Halloween in more bearable bits. So that maybe they, they want to dress up as something scary. You can help them do that in small doses. Right? Like maybe a, a simple ghost, uh, before something bloody and gory.



Right? And save some of that stuff for the adolescent.

So as we wrap up, let's give a quick

three point summary of the most important things to understand about Halloween.

**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Number one would be um, being scared is not fun many young children. Number [00:13:00] two: Dressing children up as a particular character when their reality testing is not fully developed is confusing for the child because they can't make a distinction between who they are and what they're wearing in the costume. And uh lastly, I will gently say that Halloween seems to be more parent driven than child driven and parents need to keep that in mind

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** So let me do a quick commercial. If you are a parent in the Cleveland area and you like what you hear about our approach to early childhood education, you might consider enrollment for your little ones in our toddler group or preschool. Hanna Perkins was an early pioneer in social emotional education way back to the 1950s when, uh, we were still calling it nursery school. Our school has rolling admissions. So we are always [00:14:00] giving tours and taking applications, and you can get lots more information at our website, [Hannaperkins.org](http://Hannaperkins.org) for those listening, [HANNAPERKINS.ORG](http://HANNAPERKINS.ORG)

So. Our next segment is called, let's Rephrase that, where we talk through things grownups say to children, and come up with maybe alternatives that are a little bit more useful, uh, developmentally Ready to try it again? A family is getting ready to go trick or treating.

The 5-year-old is dressed up like Elsa from Frozen. The 8-year-old is going as a scary clown. It's his first scary costume, and he's so excited that he's been talking about it for days.

But when he comes downstairs fully dressed, wearing a mask and holding a plastic machete smeared with fake blood, the 5-year-old suddenly decides she does not want to go trick or treating after all. After trying to reason with her dad says, well, you can't stay home alone. You don't want to ruin Halloween for all of us, do you? [00:15:00] There's a lot to unpack there.



**ANITA M. Eddie, MA, ATR, MSSA, LISW-S:** Well I'll start at the end, and that is definitely we can rethink how we're going to do this. And maybe the 8-year-old can go separate from the little one, or the little one can stay back and not go out at all. But not make the little one believe that they have ruined Halloween for everyone. That is a huge feeling that the child probably didn't but now that they do it's pretty big inside of them. So look for the behavior to come after that.

**Dr. Kimberly Bell:** One of the things I take issue with too is this idea that after trying to convince them it's fine, I would make a change there too. I think that that, that you need to encourage the child to talk about why they all of a sudden don't [00:16:00] want to go.

And yes, it's true.

We haven't touched on what it means to have multiple children at different ages. So maybe your older child is ready to manage the big, scary stuff. But you have a 5-year-old in the family who has not figured out that their sibling didn't just become evil and scary. And I think you have to help modulate the behavior of your older child out of respect for the limitations of your 5-year-old. I, I think it needs to go in that direction because what this example was doing was asking a 5-year-old to deal with much older issues. Like you have an older sibling, so you have to hurry up and be OK with it. Whereas I would actually ask that the 7-year-old manage [00:17:00] down for the needs of the younger one, if it cannot be done separately because you're a single parent, you know, like if there's no other way to stay home, then I would ask, I would ask the child to maybe it's a compromise. Leave the machete at home or take off the mask.

Um, and only put the mask on when you're walking up to a house and ringing the doorbell and the the small child can walk around with you holding your hand and never has to go up to a door. Like there are compromises that everybody can make in order to not insist that a 5-year-old grow up faster than somebody who doesn't have an older sibling.

Alright.

Thank you for being here, Anita.

If you have any questions about parenting or child development, we are happy to answer them. You can send questions by email to the hidden language of

[00:18:00] children@gmail.com. That's  
HIDDENLANGUAGEOFCHILDREN@GMAIL.COM..

Thank you for joining us.

We hope you enjoyed this conversation. It's always a difficult one when we talk about, uh, things like holidays , but we hope you found something useful to take away from it.

The. Language of Children Podcast is a production of nonprofit Hannah Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Our producer is Bob Rosenbaum and Dan Ratner is our consulting producer.

If you like this podcast, please subscribe to hear future episodes and share it with friends and family.

We welcome your comments. For more links and information about our approach to healthy child development, you can visit us at [hiddenlanguageofchildren.org](http://hiddenlanguageofchildren.org). I am Dr. Kimberly Bell, and we will see you next time.

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