



Halloween Jitters

It's the ghost and goblin time of the year again and while most kids can't wait to canvas the neighborhood in search of free candy, if you've had a death in the family, your children may feel differently. Why?

The history of Halloween is steeped in the Celtic tradition that on the last day of October, when the harvest season had ended and the days were getting colder, the God of Death allowed the souls of the dead to come back to the earth to visit the homes where they once had lived. This was a scary night for the Celts so bonfires were built to frighten away any evil spirits. Translated into contemporary culture, Halloween themes of ghosts, cemeteries and tombstones still carry the aura of evil spirits and can be unexpected and scary reminders to children of death.

Younger children, in particular, can have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality so Halloween imagery may seem real. They may not be able to put the reasons for their fears into words and all you may observe is their lack of interest in Halloween festivities. Other children may actually experience nightmares or be frightened by darkness.

Whatever the response, it's important to validate your child's feelings. "I can understand that Halloween seems scary this year" is a simple way to do this. Don't minimize Halloween fears or insist that your child participate in an activity that is perceived to be frightening. It's also not necessary to draw a connection between the images of death evoked by the holiday and the recent death in the family

The next thing to do is to help your child figure out a way to manage the scared feelings. Practical problem solving is essential to helping your child feel more in control.

Remember that the Celts built bonfires to ward off their Halloween fears. Light can be a powerful antidote to the worries that fester in the darkness. Nightlights for indoors and flashlights and glow-sticks for outdoors can go a long way to restoring children's confidence in their ability to be in control of their environment.