

MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD

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FRIGHTFUL SIGHTS OF SCARY NIGHTS By Fred Rogers

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It can be fun to be scared, as many of us recall from Halloweens past. But if we think back, we'll probably agree that there were two things that make it possible for scariness to be fun. First, that we knew we were safe because someone we loved was nearby. Second, we knew that whatever was scaring us was only pretend.

Years ago, one of my sons decided that he wanted a Halloween costume that would be really scary. After weeks of searching we finally found him a costume that looked like an angry monster. When he saw it, he thought it was just fine, but when Halloween arrived and he put it on, something happened. He looked in the mirror and he was the one who got scared -- so scared, in fact, that he pulled it off and wouldn't wear it. We had to make do at the last minute with something else.

A friend of ours recalls a time when a costume caused a problem for her 4-year-old son, Brian. When this mother came in to say goodnight before going out to a fancy-dress party, she was dressed as a fortune teller. Even though Brian knew this figure was his mother, his lip started quivering and he almost started to cry.



"It's only me, " his mom said. "I thought you'd like to see my costume." Brian nodded, but he wasn't completely reassured.

Dress-up and disguise are meant to be fun, but sometimes they turn out not to be. There can be many reasons, but a frequent one is that costumes can evoke some common childhood fears. One that we probably all had in the first years of our lives was that the person we felt most part of would suddenly leave us -- and that could mean his or her changing into someone different.

Infants feel a part of their closest caregivers at the beginning of life. Such caregivers offer an infant's world organization and meaning and provide what security and comfort an infant first comes to know.

Brian was certainly old enough to "know" his mother was under that Gypsy costume. All the same, her dramatically changed appearance may have touched off some fears that had been very real to him only a year or two before.

As I think back on my own son's experience, I think what must have happened is this. Our son was at the age when, like most children, he was working hard on controlling his anger, which was probably why he wanted a monster costume in the first place -- scary, angry feelings were very important to him.

I'm sure he knew that the creature he saw in the mirror was pretend, and he knew that we were nearby. All the

same, his feelings were real, and he wasn't sure yet that he could control them. He may have been afraid that with that costume on he might let himself try to hurt somebody -- and that somebody might really hurt him!

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There's something else these stories point out: It takes a lot of growing for children to feel secure about what's real and what's pretend. We need to encourage our children in their play, but we need to remember that the normal fears and fantasies of early childhood, even when acted out in pretending, are very real indeed.

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Years ago, one of my sons decided that he wanted a Halloween costume that would be really scary. After weeks of "Mister Rogers Talks About Superheroes," an entire week of programs to help young children cope with their feelings about superheroes, will be rebroadcast October 22-26, 1990 on PBS. Highlights include visiting with Lou Ferrigno as he is made up as The Incredible Hulk. For exact times, call your local PBS station and ask when programs #1466-#1470 will air.

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