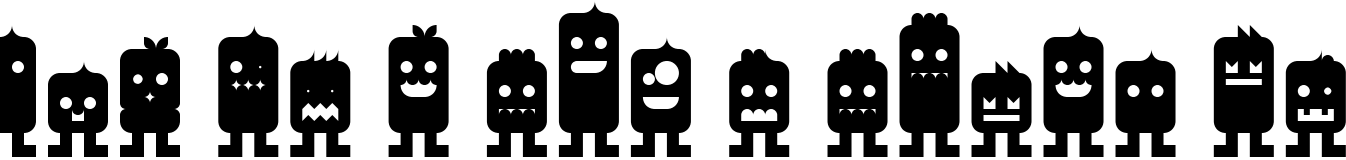


Talking with children

about monsters



It's a gray, blustery day. The 4-year-olds tug on sweaters and caps as they go outdoors to play. Ms. Andrews looks up at the sky, wondering if it might rain.

"Ayeeeeeee."

She turns to the sound of the scream. A child comes running, her eyes wild with fright.

"Katie, what's the matter?"

The child thrusts herself into the teacher's waiting arms. Ms. Andrews soothes the child, stroking her hair and wiping away tears. Other children stop what they are doing and gather around.

"Are you all right?" asks Ms. Andrews. "What happened?" Between the child's sobs, Ms. Andrews learns that Katie has seen something behind the old oak tree.

"You wait here. I'll go look." Ms. Andrews crosses the yard, passes the tree, and stops. A green plastic garbage bag has gotten caught in the fence, its yellow

drawstrings flapping in the wind. She yanks the bag free and brings it back to the children.

"I thought it was a monster," Katie says. "It had three shiny eyes and yellow tongues trying to get me."

Fear is normal in children. It's one of the earliest emotions and may show up when we least expect it. It's also an important learning opportunity. Talking about it can aid children's emotional growth.

Fear varies by age and child. Babies may develop *stranger anxiety* when confronted with someone they don't know and later *separation anxiety* when parents leave them in child care. Toddlers may develop fears of new or noisy things, such as the toilet or vacuum cleaner. They also may be terrorized by animals, the dark,

and life-sized, costumed characters ranging from Santa Claus to Halloween ghouls.

Between ages 2 and 6, children's increasing ability to create mental images of people, animals, and objects enables them to imagine monsters in the closet or under the bed. Strange sounds on the roof or shadows in a corner may fill them with dread.

By school age, children begin to have fears about real things that might happen to them, such as a car wreck, burglar in the house, or tornado.

Children develop fears at different ages and in varying intensities. What scares one child may delight another. Jonas is afraid of snakes, for example, while Ruby is fascinated with them.

What do children already know?

For preschool children, the line between fantasy and reality is



blurred. They may enjoy watching characters in movies like *Monsters, Inc.* and the Cookie Monster on Sesame Street, but they can panic when they see the same character in person.

Bedtime can be especially challenging because children may be afraid of the dark, being alone, or hearing strange sounds. Children's fears can be intensified by watching horror movies, violent TV shows, and news accounts of war and crime.

To find out what children already know about monsters, talk individually with their parents. Do children have trouble going to sleep and worry about monsters under the bed? How do parents respond?

Monsters on DVD

Monsters, Inc. 2001. Los Angeles: Pixar Animation Studios/Walt Disney Pictures. (92 minutes)

This computer-animated film follows the antics of two monsters (voices of Billy Crystal and John Goodman) who work in a factory where workers collect children's screams to power a monster city. The action moves fast, and the dialogue contains plenty of gags to entertain grownups.

This film is entertaining, but entertainment alone does not justify showing it in school. Instead you might show a five-minute excerpt to start a conversation or enlighten children on some point—that monsters are fiction and that everyone has feelings, for example. Be sure to watch the excerpt with the children and talk about what they saw and how they felt.

You can help children overcome their fears of monsters by asking questions, providing information, and showing how others react to monsters. Observe these guidelines:

- Show compassion for children's fears about monsters. Avoid putdowns such as "That's silly." Remember that fear is real to a child. The goal is to learn how to handle fear in a positive way.
- Model strength. Children rely on you to keep them safe. They learn to handle situations by imitating what you do. By watching Ms. Andrews, children learned they can ask for help and find out more about what's really going on. Sometimes courage is a matter of taking action.
- Review books, videos, websites, and other materials about monsters before sharing them with children. Consider whether the message is reassuring or may intensify fears.

Start conversations with books

Reading a book about monsters at circle time allows children to express their feelings in a safe environment. Sample questions for discussion:

- How does the monster look?
- Where is the monster?
- How does the monster sound?
- How does the child in the book feel about the monster?
- How do you feel about the monster? Is it strange, scary, and mean (or funny and cute)?
- What does the child do?
- What are some things you might do if you were in the same situation?

- Is this monster real? Could it be something the child imagines? Could this book be a story that someone made up?
- If you think a monster is nearby, what could you do?

Activities to tame the monsters

Help children explore monsters—real and imagined—while engaging in routine classroom activities.

Group time

When children share—and compare—their fears the scary world becomes smaller and more controllable.

Show me what you're feeling

Discuss a range of feelings—happy, sad, excited, frightened, and silly. Take time to explore each, encouraging children to describe how they feel and when they feel that way. Ask questions to further the exploration of feelings. For example, "How does your face look when you're ...? How do your hands show that you're ...? Can you show ... and ... feelings at the same time?"

Tension

Children feel stress just as adults do. Sometimes children's stress is expressed through challenging behaviors, aggression, tears, or withdrawal—just as it is in adults. Invite children to explore how their bodies react to tension—and how they feel when the tension is gone.

Describe typical scenarios that can frighten children—losing sight of their family in the grocery store, hearing a loud argument, seeing an injured animal, or learning to swim. Invite the children to



Books for children

Dear Big, Mean, Ugly Monster. Berglin, Ruth. 2005. Washington, D.C.: Child and Family Press.

Writing a letter is the key to dealing with this under-bed monster—and the monster writes back!

Go Away, Big Green Monster! Emberley, Ed. 1992. New York: Little Brown & Co.

Each page reveals a monster's facial feature or body part one by one. When it's fully depicted, the text reads "You don't scare me," and the features disappear in the same way they came.

Bye-Bye, Big Bad Bullybug! Emberley, Ed. 2007. New York: LB Kids.

Big Bad Bullybug likes to scare itty bitty baby bugs but in the end gets stomped by Big Foot.

There Was an Old Monster! Emberley, Rebecca; Adrian Emberley; and Ed Emberley. 2009. London: Orchard Books.

The old monster swallows a tick that made him sick, some ants that made him dance in his pants, and so forth in rhyme, building vocabulary with humor and fun. Scholastic.com offers a link to the words chanted by Adrian (Ed's granddaughter).

If You're a Monster and You Know It. Emberley, Rebecca and Ed Emberley. 2010. London: Orchard Books.

The text invites actions such as snort and growl, smack your claws, stomp your feet to the tune "If You're Happy and You Know It."

Everything I Know About Monsters. Lichtenheld, Tom. 2002. New York: Simon & Schuster.

School-age children will enjoy this encyclopedic treatment that includes Frankensteins, robots, movie monsters, aliens, and more.

My Monster Mama Loves Me So. Leuck, Laura. 2002. New York: HarperCollins.

Baby monster lists the many ways his monster mother loves him, providing reassurance in a funny, loving way.

There Are Monsters Everywhere. Mayer, Mercer. 2005. New York: Dial/Penguin.

A boy understands that his parents can't see the monsters everywhere in his room so he learns karate.

There's a Nightmare in My Closet. Mayer, Mercer. 1992. London: Puffin.

A boy who usually hides from the monster that resides in his closet decides to take action by wearing his soldier helmet and cocking his pop gun.

There's an Alligator Under My Bed. Mayer, Mercer. 1987. New York: Dial/Penguin.

A boy comes up with a simple plan to entice an alligator out of his bedroom and into the garage.

There's Something in My Attic. Mayer, Mercer. 1992. London: Puffin.

Because Mom and Dad don't believe there's a monster in the attic, their cowgirl daughter lassos the critter to show them it's real.

Good Night, Dear Monster. Morris, Terry N. 1980. New York: Random House.

A little girl and her teddy bear come to a friendly truce with an overly friendly nighttime monster.

I Need My Monster. Noll, Amanda. 2009. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Flashlight Press.

Ethan has formed an affectionate attachment to his monster and can't fall asleep without it. One night when the monster goes fishing, Ethan summons a series of silly and scary substitutes, but none of them will do.

Alligator Boy. Rylant, Cynthia and Diane Goode. 2007. San Diego: Harcourt.

A boy is tired of being a boy and an alligator suit offers a new, green life.

Where the Wild Things Are. Sendak, Maurice. 1988. New York: Harper Collins.

Max learns to control his own monster—anger.

My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins or Things. Viorst, Judith. 1987. New York: Atheneum.

How can Nick be sure his mother is right about monsters, when she's wrong about other things?

The Scariest Monster in the World. Weatherly, Lee. 2009. New York: Boxer Books/Sterling.

A monster that is always scaring the woodland animals comes down with the hiccups. It tries everything but ends up crying in frustration and learns to change his scary ways.

Leonardo, The Terrible Monster. Willems, Mo. 2005. New York: Hyperion.

Leonardo is a terrible monster—he can't scare anyone—but with considerable efforts he finds that being a friend is a better choice than scaring anyway.



show stress—tightened muscles, shoulders raised, and clenched jaw—and then the opposite, relaxation—easy breathing, liquid muscles, and calm. Play a game that exaggerates the body’s responses by calling out “Tense” or “Relax” at different times of the day. Encourage children to recognize their own body’s responses to tension and the tricks they can use to relax.

Dramatic play

Invite children to make believe they are Mom and Dad tucking their child in bed to sleep. Pretend that the child is afraid of something under the bed. How can the parents help their child?

Show pictures of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro or Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans and other cities. Put on a costume and paint your face in front of the children. Ask: “How did I change how I look? Is this still me?” Talk about how actors in movies and TV shows sometimes wear costumes to look like someone or something else to tell an imaginary story.

Provide beads, hats, wigs, and scarves and invite children to dress up and stage a parade.

As children become comfortable with costumes, add masks. Face coverings are frequently frightening to children so proceed respectfully. The least scary mask is one that creates the illusion of disguise but allows full vision. Make one by bending a wire coat hanger into a large diamond shape. Curl the hook end into a circle and tape securely. Cover the diamond with old nylon stockings or knee-high socks. Look for colored or patterned nylons and add felt facial features as desired. Children can hold this mask away from their



faces—avoiding the claustrophobic feeling of traditional masks.

Music

What better way to smash out monsters than with a bit of song and dance. Encourage children to vividly describe their imaginary monsters before moving.

Monster dance

Obtain a recording of the 1960s dance hit “Monster Mash” through the Internet or your library. The lyrics are a takeoff of the Frankenstein story, and the dance uses the same squashing steps as the “Mashed Potatoes,” another 1960s hit.

Chant the refrain as you encourage children to dance, making faces and moving arms in creepy ways:

He did the mash.
He did the monster mash.
The monster mash
It was a graveyard smash.
He did the mash.
It caught on in a flash.
He did the mash.
He did the monster mash.

School-age children

Invite children to investigate legendary creatures such as Yeti, the Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas; the Golem, the protector of the Jews in 16th century Prague; and Nessie, the monster reputed to dwell in the Loch Ness in Scotland. Ask questions, such as:

- How did legends like these come about?
- Why are we interested in such stories?
- Do you think the strange creatures could be real or not?

Monster song

The book *If You're a Monster and You Know It* suggests singing the text to the tune “If You're Happy and You Know It.” Replace the words in the action lines from “clap your hands” to “snarl and growl” and other monster behavior.

Or use the same tune with different words such as “There's a monster in the attic, and it growls. Grrrr Grrr.”

Art

Art activities can give children opportunities to explore their monster fears with curiosity and creativity. Encourage outrageous explorations that can help children master the monster.

Monster collage

Set out an assortment of construction paper scraps in varied colors along with scissors and paste. Encourage children to make a monster mask, poster, or collage.

Encourage children to create a monster of their own, not like one in a book or on TV. Ask: “How many eyes will it have?” “What color will it be?” “Will it have sharp teeth or claws?”

Monster sculpture

Make several batches of play dough and add food coloring to each to make varied colors. Encourage children to mold a monster of their own choosing.

Set out bits of aluminum foil, polystyrene packing chips, buttons or pebbles, ice cream sticks, pipe cleaners, yarn, and other craft items that children might use for monster eyes, hair, and claws.

Blocks

Where does the monster live? And what happens when we tear the house down?

Monster house

Invite children to build a monster house or cave. Encourage children to think about the size of the structure, openings such as doors and windows, and beds and other furnishings. Provide toy figures and vehicles as props.

Show children pictures of monster trucks (available through a quick search on the Internet). Point out the huge wheels and the trucks' agility at driving over other vehicles. Suggest that the word *monster* often refers to a real object that is big and looks threatening.

Fearfulness—of monsters and of more realistic threats like bullies, barking dogs, and abandonment—is an expected and appropriate response to a world that is too big for a child to control. When you help children identify their fears and offer them techniques for taming scary monsters you provide vital tools for helping children regulate their emotional and social selves.