

Forget Halloween. Children Are Frightening Year-Round.

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Some parents don't need spooky stories or horror movies. The real terror already lives within the walls of their homes.

To be clear, I'm talking about little children.

Kids can be incredibly eerie. They seem innocent but sometimes appear highly sophisticated. And when they communicate, it's often in such a simple, uninhibited way that many adults find it unnerving. Especially when their children are talking about something unpleasant.

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It's not uncommon for children to explore all kinds of themes in their pretend play, including violence, fear and risk, said Marjorie Taylor, a professor emerita of psychology at the University of Oregon, and an expert on the ways in which children create imaginary companions.

When your child is engaging in imaginary play, you can use that as an opportunity to learn more about what's on her mind and explore why it's interesting to her, Dr. Taylor said. Try asking nonintrusive, open-ended questions, like, "How did the skeletons make you feel?" "Why does your imaginary friend like to argue so much?" or, simply, "Tell me more about that."

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