

# How to take some of the fear out of Halloween



Leo's birthday comes not long after Halloween. That hadn't really occurred to me until the first October when we went shopping for birthday plates and napkins at a party store.

Leo, who was almost 4, stood and stared at a zombie holding a bleeding arm and a grim reaper dripping with black cobwebby gauze. The store was full of creepy noises and spooky items with moving parts.

We picked out some fire engine party supplies, paid the cashier, and headed home. But the haunting was just beginning. For weeks Leo asked question after question about zombies. And for the first time he started having nightmares.



When Leo's little brother, Daniel, arrived home from China, he was a little scared of stuffed animals—which is not uncommon for a child who has never seen them before. As Halloween approached, we wondered how he would cope with trick-or-treaters who were dressed in large stuffed costumes—and some who would be wearing far scarier attire.

Even this year when Leo's Darth Vader costume arrived in the mail, Daniel gave him a wide berth at first, taking time to warm up to it. It was only when Daniel snatched the mask to run off and laughingly try it on himself that I knew he was all right. Until that moment, I thought we might be trick-or-treating in two groups of two this year. But after nearly two months playing with the Darth Vader costume, our construction worker is content to trick-or-treat alongside a heavy-breathing Sith.

If there's one thing I learned in our training to become parents through adoption, it's that you should always embrace professional help. So, as we were looking ahead to Halloween this year, I thought of how each year we have faced different challenges and fears with our young children. And it occurred to me that there are people who could offer more helpful advice than "They'll grow out of it," or "Once he sees that the giant vampire bunny is Uncle Clyde, he'll be all right."



So I called La Keita Carter, Psy.D., director of the behavioral health and assessment services for the Loyola Clinical Centers, to do an interview for my full-time job (editing *Loyola* magazine), and I asked her how parents can help the haunted holiday cause more fun than fright.

She offered this advice for helping a child who expresses anxiety about the holiday:

**1. Control your child's environment.** *"If there are a lot of fears at Halloween, don't take your children trick-or-treating in the neighborhood. Take them to the mall or their church or synagogue," Carter said. Then you know that people will be wearing less-frightening costumes and there won't be as many surprises. This year she took her two preschoolers to a Hallelujah costume party at church, where there were no frightening masks.*

**2. Don't be afraid to ignore the doorbell.** *"Skip answering the door on Halloween night because you never know who's on the other side of it," she said, and the costumes could terrify a particularly sensitive child. "Your kid could be afraid of that person."*

**3. Before you take your child trick-or-treating, think of what you might find on the other side of the door.** *"You could literally have a huge rat opening the door. You know your child. If your child is a little shy around new people, do something else. Now they're going to start to connect and think people that I don't know are scary."*

**4. Be attuned to your child's body language.** *"If you are going trick or treating—you feel your child is old enough and you're going house to house—and you feel your child is pulling back, read your child's body language. Don't push it. Don't ignore your child's natural signs. They know how they feel even though they can't articulate how they're feeling."*

You can read more tips from La Keita Carter [here](#). Have a wonderful Halloween with your family, however you celebrate!



*If you have any tips on how you ease your children through Halloween—or any holiday—I'd love to hear them.*