

When fun things are scary

We were at moderate size amusement park—our first as a family. My son was almost two and an easy tempered portable kid. We had already dragged him on several long road trips throughout New England and he was a wonderful traveling companion.

Nothing prepared me for his reaction to the theme park. The noise, the loud music, the crowds of people all seemed to overwhelm him. But the worst moment was when he saw a larger than life costumed cartoon character. As Mickey Mouse approached my son, head bobbing and hand outstretched, my son screamed and flew up into my arms, turning the family fun day into a frustrating event. I explained what a costume was, but my son was suspicious and it took some time for him to believe that he was not in danger.

What do kids really see?

We don't always know how kids see or hear what is occurring around them. A nursery school teacher told the story of a three year old who cried uncontrollably throughout the annual school trip to the pumpkin farm. The red-faced child finally stopped sobbing when his mom picked him at the end of the school day. When asked why he was so upset, the boy answered, "I thought the bus would break down". When the mother followed with "What did you think happens when a bus breaks down?" the child answered, "The bus falls down on your head." No wonder he cried.

Young kids process information as best they can, in spite of gaps in knowledge or comprehension. The colorful and harmless costumes seem scary when a child thinks he is seeing a monster. The familiar bus ride is dangerous when casual words are taken literally. The toddlers world is filled with uncertainty as they slowly learn what is real and what is pretend in the world around them.

What do we do

Lots of things can frighten our young children and it is really hard to prepare them for some experiences at this age. Birthday parties can get scary when the clown emerges and the balloons pop. The loud noise is unsettling and gets associated with the funny looking person. Many young children have a hard time at amusement parks and don't find all the stimulation amusing. Even though we may explain and soothe away the initial fright, many toddlers will spend lots of time needing contact with parents.

As for children wearing costumes themselves, they generally are fine with clothing, but less comfortable with masks. It is only when they are about two that young children recognize themselves in the mirror. Changing how they look, or how others look to them, makes many children uncomfortable.