

# Is your child ready for a visit to a haunted house?

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**DES MOINES (INA) —** Care for a scare? If you care for your children, you probably would be wise to take precautions before sending them to a haunted house this Halloween.

Des Moines psychologist Susan McNeil suggested that parents should play an important role in fostering healthy experiences with haunted houses for their children.

McNeil said parents should screen the haunted house and consider the child's ability to deal with the spooks inside.

Jane Rankin psychology professor at Drake University, said parents should "debrief" their children after

they have gone through a haunted house — explain that the corpse was not a dead man or that the blood wasn't real — to help the children differentiate between reality and fantasy.

**McNEIL SAID** that certain children are more likely to react negatively to haunted houses. For the disturbed, sensitive, emotional child, haunted houses often turn out to be traumatic experiences.

The experience of one of McNeil's clients illustrates this point. This teen-ager was very upset by her experience in a haunted house. Apparently, something inside the haunted house triggered her memory of some unpleasant childhood experiences.

Examples such as this seem to support a statement made by psychologist John McHenry of Akron, Ohio. He was quoted in USA Today as saying that haunted

houses, are "disgusting blots of shame that ruin children's minds."

Haunted houses have been described as "horrible versions of home" by Margaret Holmes Williamson in *Middletown Families*, a sociological study of mid-America over about 90 years.

However, other child psychologists said that haunted houses can be good, clean fun.

**HARRIET SHAKLEE**, professor of child psychology at the University of Iowa said. It would be fair to say people in general enjoy a scary experience in a safe circumstance. Young children are sometimes truly frightened, however, because they don't realize it is a safe environment.

McNeil said that McHenry's statement was a little extreme. She said, "If not carried to extremes, the

whole idea is good for most kids."

Dr. Hector Cavallin, a Des Moines psychiatrist, agreed with McNeil. He said haunted houses are one way children learn to deal with anxiety. Most children's stories involve people dying or changing forms, and children use the stories to control their own fears, Cavallin said.

The spooks in the haunted houses can help children enjoy their experience, too. One Des Moines area witch, Kylee Ormes, said she adjusts her performance to her "victim's" level of tolerance.

If a child is screaming into his father's chest, she tones down her act, or even tries to reassure the child that she is not a real witch. Older kids, however, get more of a show and perhaps more of a scare.