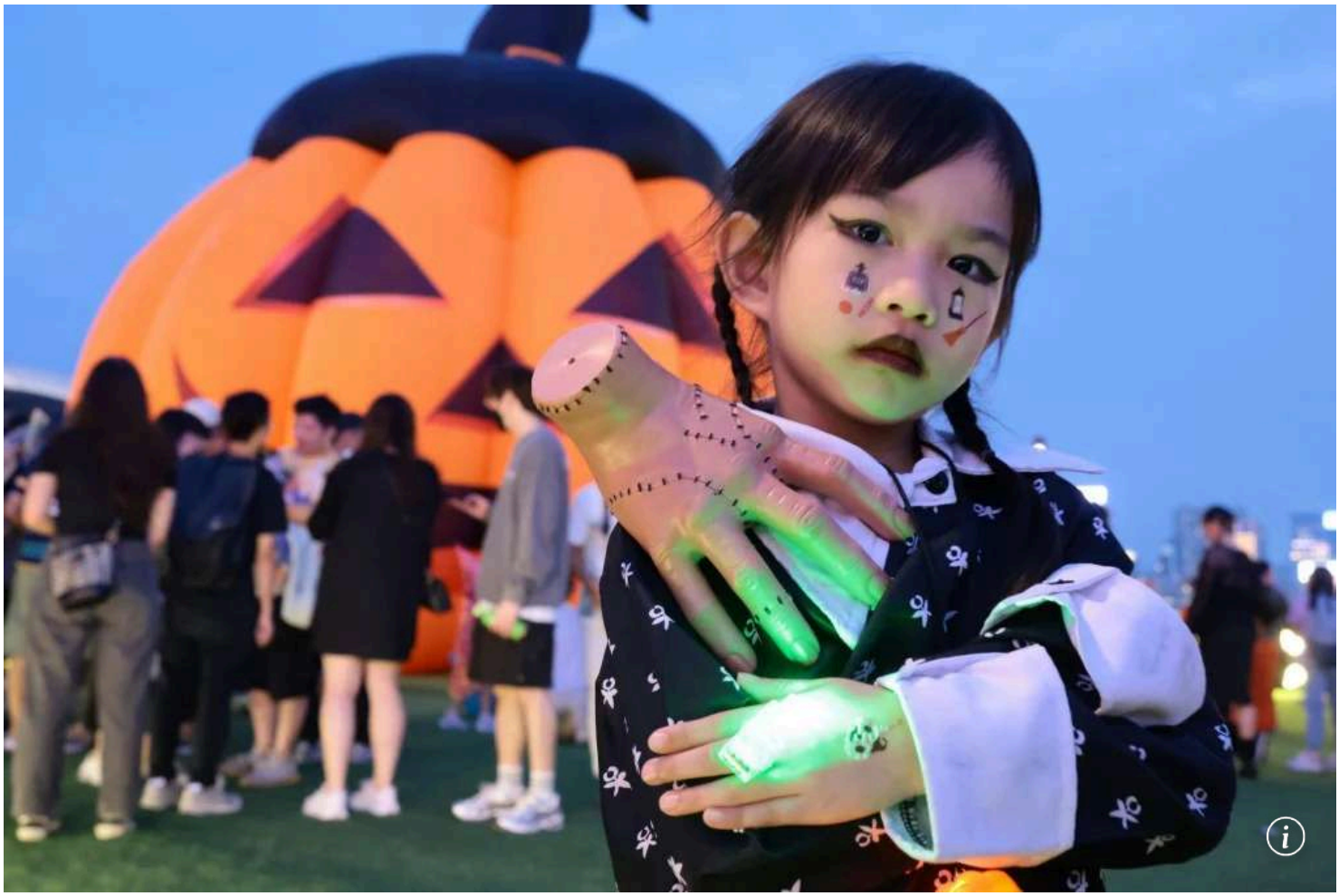
Wellness *Lifestyle / Health & Wellness*

If your child is scared of Halloween these expert tips can help them feel safe

A psychologist explains how children process fear and gives advice to parents on how to help kids cope and have a happy Halloween

Reading Time: **4 minutes**



Anthea Rowan

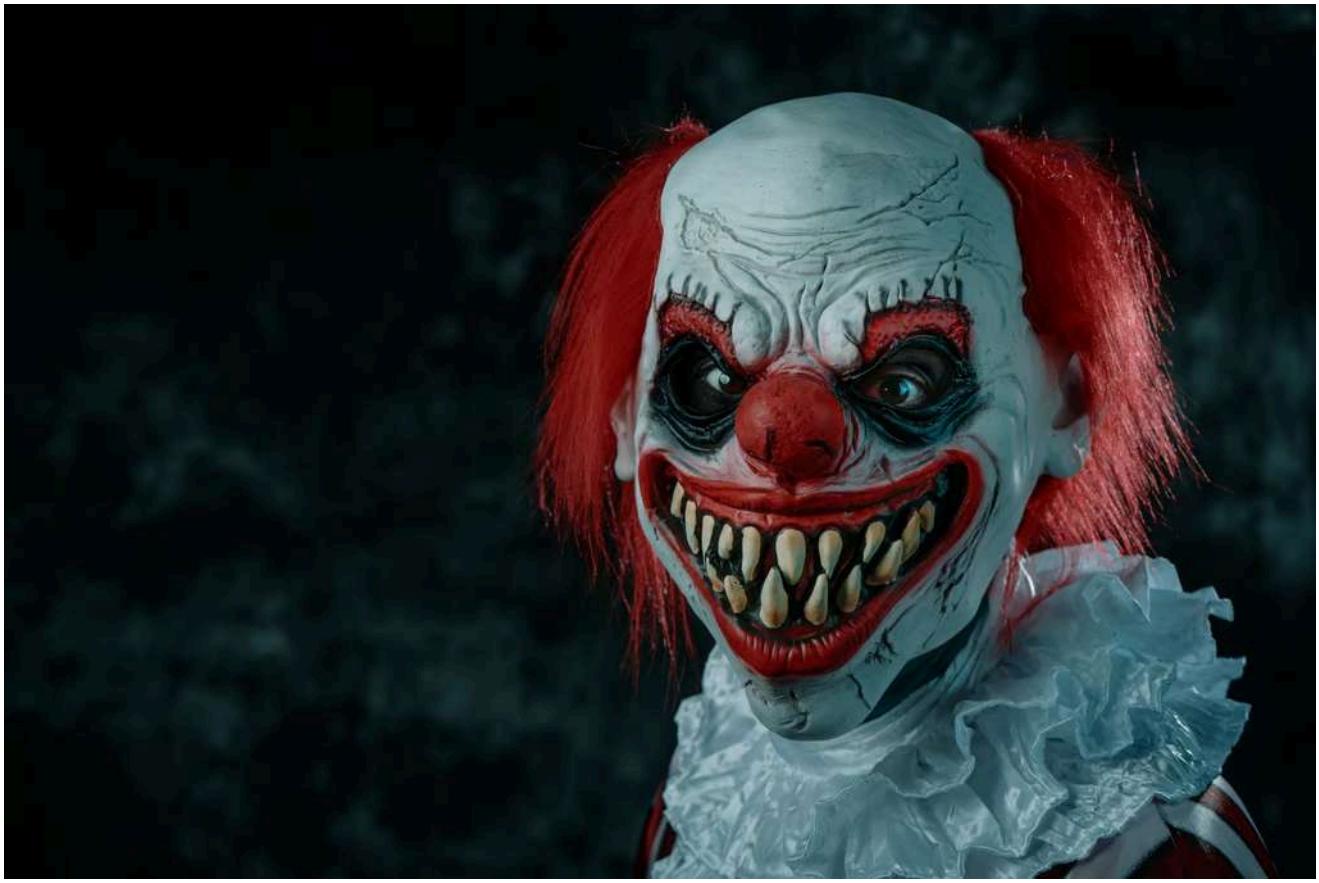
Published: 5:45am, 25 Oct 2024 | Updated: 5:54am, 25 Oct 2024

As an adult who has seen Halloween on repeat for decades, it can be easy to forget how frightening and confusing a child might find it all.

Halloween's deathly origins are thousands of years old and can be traced back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. It was believed that on one day of the year – November 1 – the souls of the deceased returned to roam among the living, who dressed up in costumes to scare the spirits off.

Modern-day trick-or-treating has scary beginnings, too. It is believed to have begun with "souling": going from door-to-door begging for "soul cakes" in exchange for prayers for the dead in purgatory – the poor spirits trapped between heaven and earth.

The key ingredient to a successful Halloween night is fright. The problem is that many children are too small to appreciate it is not real because to them it *feels* real.



About one in 100 children suffer from a fear of masked characters – a phobia called masklophobia, or sometimes maskaphobia. Photo: Shutterstock

Feeling afraid affects adults and children differently because the brain of an adult is much more mature than the brain of a child.

The amygdala in the brain detects whether a fear is real, and the hippocampus, which manages short-term memory, links the fear response.

Both play an important role in the release of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, which in turn influence the prefrontal cortex to respond – with emotion or action.

Excessive fear can prompt the production of excessive cortisol, which affects children's ability to manage the stress of some experiences.

This is probably one of the reasons children show heightened fear generalisation – when fear becomes caused by innocuous stimuli – compared with adults, something that changes as brains mature.

We should not be so surprised that witnessing unrecognisable masked faces, hearing screams, and watching parades of people dressed as ghosts or corpses should terrify children – studies say that it can and does.

About one in 100 children suffer from a fear of masked characters – a phobia called masklophobia, or sometimes maskaphobia. Nearly half suffer, or have suffered, from a fear of the dark – nyctophobia.

> [Children's] understanding of the world is limited, which can amplify feelings of fear
>
> — **Dr Quratulain Zaidi, a clinical psychologist**

These phobias, which frequently develop as the consequence of a frightening experience, can last a lifetime.

My sister, now in her 50s, still has not forgotten the fear that a man in a mask – thinking he was being funny – inspired in her when she was about four.

Fear "is a fundamental human emotion" and often serves an important role, says Dr Quratulain Zaidi, a clinical psychologist and founder of the MindNLife psychology practice in Hong Kong. She warns, though, that its impact on children can be profound and long-lasting.

I tell Zaidi the story of my sister's reaction to the mask – a reaction which spoke to real terror.

FURTHER READING

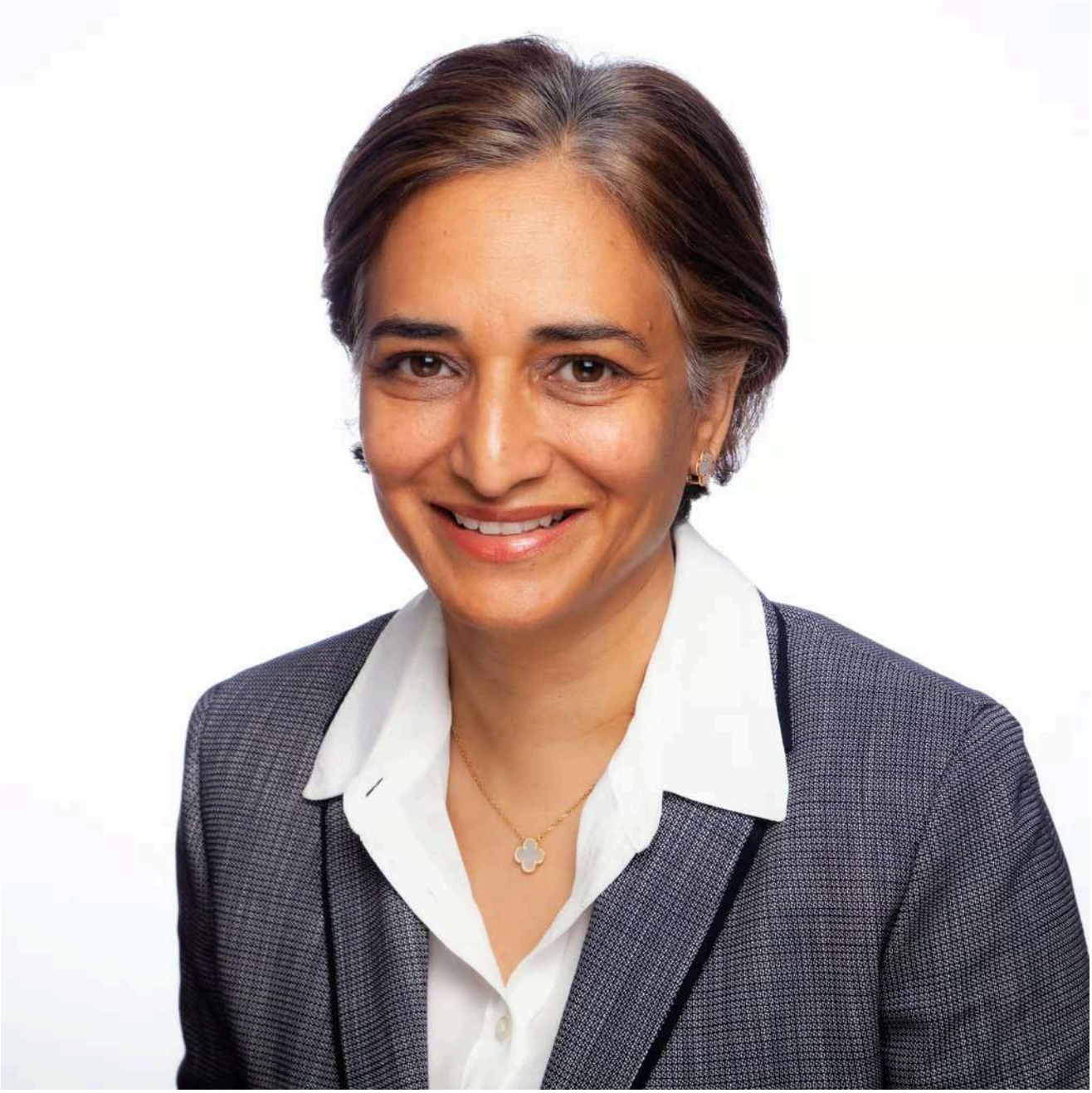
Baby massage relieved her postnatal depression. Now she teaches it

'The biggest crime' – paediatrician on why climate change hurts our kids

Gen Z hit hard by mental health issues, but they are fighting back

Which diet has Kim Kardashian done on and off for years to lose weight?

Zaidi explains that research shows traumatic memories formed after a scary traumatic experience – "such as the visual images that are common during Halloween season and are really scary" – can have side effects that persist long after the event itself if not addressed properly.



Dr Quratulain Zaidi is a clinical psychologist and founder of the MindNLife psychology practice in Hong Kong. Photo: Dr Quratulain Zaidi

Children are particularly vulnerable to fear, and to the lasting impression of a fearful experience, as their brains are still developing, she says.

“Their understanding of the world is limited, which can amplify feelings of fear. Traumatic events can lead to heightened anxiety and fear responses, impacting their emotional and psychological development.”

Zaidi has personal experience of witnessing the lasting effect of fear on a child. Her daughter, 25 now, was about four when she had an experience that affects her still today.

“I will never forget it. We were leaving her swimming class and there was a Halloween party at the same venue,” Zaidi recalls.

They encountered a handful of teenagers dressed up as witches and skeletons with lots of red on their faces.

Zaidi recalls her daughter’s shock and horror as she looked at them.

“She screamed and froze. I will never forget the way those teenagers laughed at her or how hard she hugged me.”