

BOO!

I hope that made you jump, and that you've just enjoyed a bit of a scare.

Enjoying a scare is a strange idea. Usually we avoid things that scare us, and often that's good. Often when we do something scary, there is another reason to do it, like overcoming nerves to perform in public. But for some things, being scared IS the reason to do it. That's what Halloween is about, and listening to ghost stories, and for those who like that sort of thing, horror movies. So we must rather enjoy being scared, just a bit.

There's a splendid fairy tale about a boy who "couldn't get the shivers". He seems rather stupid in other ways, so when he asks people how he can get the shivers, people play tricks on him and send him to stay in a haunted house full of terrifying ghouls. But he isn't fazed and ends up shaping skulls into bowling balls to play skittles with bones. In the end, his new wife introduces him to the shivers by throwing a bucket of ice cold water over him.

We might not go looking for haunted houses, but most of us enjoy some things where we court danger. One of my friends used to embarrass the rest of us when we went to the cinema, because any time something happened on screen that made him jump, he would shriek and grab his girlfriend's hand. This was when he was 20! In the middle of a serious film, there would be a wave of laughter in the audience as people reacted to him being so scared. You could also get a good shriek out of him by sitting behind him and grabbing his shoulder at a tense moment. But he enjoyed being scared, and we enjoyed scaring him.

In the playground game, "What's the time, Mr Wolf?", one player is "Mr Wolf". He stands with his back to the other players, who start in a line at the other end. They chant, "What's the time, Mr Wolf?" as they advance towards him. Mr Wolf turns round and everyone freezes while he answers with a random time, "It's three o'clock.", etc.

Then he turns his back on them again, and the process repeats until he decides to shout, "It's dinnertime!" and chases them back to the starting line, hoping to catch one of them who becomes the new Mr Wolf.

Some players are very set on "winning", so they only make small steps and are still a long way away from Mr Wolf when they have to run. They never get caught, but they seem to be missing the point of the game. Other players will take big risks, making giant steps so that when Mr Wolf calls "dinnertime" they are in danger of being caught and have to "run for their lives". They seem to have more fun.

So here's a question: why do we enjoy being scared?

You'll need to read this one out rather than getting them to read it, as it's important to get them quietly settled, have a bit of a pause, and then shout, "Boo!" loudly to start off with a bit of a shock, waiting for the reaction to die down before you continue with the rest.

After reading the stimulus, you might start with my question and then, five minutes into the discussion, see what new questions they have and switch to that. At that stage it can be a much quicker process than the usual method of generating questions from a fairly cold start.

My thinking here is that a shared experience is often the best stimulus to a discussion. On the same principle, as a warm-up beforehand, you might play the "What's the time, Mr Wolf?" game mentioned if you can get outside.

I Am a Gnome

Or a better (and much scarier) experience if you can grab a few minutes in the hall (or do this during PE and refer back to it) is to play "I am a gnome...". This is a warm-up game I learned at an improv retreat with The Maydays (www.themaydays.co.uk). It's deliciously scary as an adult, and the effect may be genuinely terrifying for younger children, but you'll know your group!

One player is the Gnome. All the other players have to close their eyes as the gnome moves slowly about trying to catch people. As the Gnome moves, he has to continually repeat this phrase:

"I am a gnome... and I have a roll... and I'm going to EAT you!"

The other players can only move in shuffling steps (this is really important both for safety as eyes are closed, and for the game to work), responding to the sound of where the gnome is coming from. When the gnome catches you, you shriek and then become part of the gnome, joining hands, helping to catch people and joining in with the chant. Eventually, there is a huge Gnome stretching across the space, with many voices converging on the remaining "terrified" players.