



# Muppets Haunted Mansion

Movie Review

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As far back as ancient Greece people were utilizing books as methods for working through various ailments. The term, bibliography, is what we pair with the phenomenon of using media, specifically books, to help people suffering from trauma or psychological issues. While the Transfiguring Adoption is NOT claiming to be professionals in the psychological or mental health arena, we do believe that families can glean from this concept in using movies, video games, and, naturally, books, to help foster or adoptive children process their story.

## Section I

### **Why are we using books, movies, and video games to help children?**

- **Partially disengage mind from fear/problems**  
Immersing yourself in media helps you to escape from reality for a bit. This can give our minds a partial break from the worry and stress so that we have more energy to attach the issue when we come back to it.
- **Introduced to new solutions**  
We might discover new solutions to problems as we experience a character in media conquer an issue.
- **Emotional vocabulary**  
Discovering more ways to express how we feel and think can help us to communicate our own thoughts and feelings. Overall, more effective communication allows us to ask for better assistance with our feelings and issues.
- **Identify with characters/stories**  
You have heard the saying, “no man is an island.” No person wants to feel like they are alone in their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. When we discover a character in media struggling with similar issues as our own, it helps to “normalize,” our life situations and feel comforted. This can also help us to discover our own identity as a character goes through a process in their life.

## Section II

### **This Only Works TOGETHER - Parent & Child.**

Here is why it is IMPERATIVE that a parent or trusted adult walk through these questions and media with a child:

- **Trauma Triggers**

An event or language in a piece of media might remind our children of past events in their lives which were traumatic. If we are to assume that they have not yet had enough life experience to successfully walk through these situations and make sense of them, then they will need a safe adult to be able to process feelings and emotions.

Some caregiver might be nervous or scared to discuss the details of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and so on. Our children are also scared but have no choice but to live through it. Our children need an adult who can help them process through issues by listening. They need an adult who knows when information needs to be given over to a trusted therapist and other professionals.

- **Reliving Trauma**

Some media might not simply suggest or bring up past trauma but could expose a child to a similar situation as what they have experienced. If a child is exposed to such media, it goes without saying that they will need a safe adult to help them process their thoughts and emotions. They will even need a safe adult who may not have the right answers but can get the child to a professional who can help.

- **Living in a Dream World**

As much as negatively living through trauma can have a devastating effect on our children, too much of a good thing can also have a poor effect when it is experienced on their own. Some children who have come from traumatic backgrounds may have trouble separating fantasy from reality. When given media where the main character is always rescued in the nick of time, the waif always marries royalty, or all problems are solved in a neat package, our children could be given over to considering this is how the world operates and that the solutions of the characters will produce similar fantastical results. It is important to have a trusted adult on duty who can applaud the fun of a tale but also bring everyone back down to reality.

- **Never Really Find Results**

Again it can be a pitfall for caregivers to be nervous about a topic and simply hope that children will learn by experiencing a book or movie on their own. The problem is that many of our children lack the life experience to be able to connect the dots to see how a character's struggles and life solutions could be compared to their own life.

A trusted adult can help a child to glean solutions and conversations from a piece of media to make real life change begin.

## Section III

### How To Use Our Discussion Packets:

#### 1. **Exposure as a Family**

Watch, read, or play the respective media this packet discusses together before you begin the conversation. It is important that parent and child experience things together. Natural bonding and teachable moments come about when we experience things together.

#### 2. **Wait for the Right Time**

As foster and adoptive parents, many of us want to help our children so badly that when we get a new resource we want to try it out faster than a child wants to open up presents on Christmas. However, it is important to judge when your child is ready to talk about issues brought up by media.

If your child is struggling with habitual lying and just reprimanded earlier in the day at school, there might be intense feelings of guilt and embarrassment. It may not be the correct time to point out that Pinocchio gets in trouble when he lies and try to begin a discussion about how lies can harm your life. Instead wait a day or two when everything is going right in your family's world, and then try to begin a conversation.

People who are hurt, angered, frustrated or depressed due to a topic are not going to be open to having a dialogue about the issues.

#### 3. **Nudging Toward Identification**

If we look at this conversation as a swimming pool, "Nudging Toward Identification" is going to be the shallow end of the pool. The goal is to simply notice - just notice - similarities you might see in a character's life and your child's life. This step is helping our children to see that they might be able to relate with a character. The media is going from merely a source of entertainment to something we possibly - POSSIBLY - could connect with in some manner.

This might come in the form of phrases such as:

- "Hey, did you notice that in the book Sally had to figure out how to make friends at school too?"
- "Tom's brother in the movie was really good at soccer just like you, right?!"
- "Too bad you're not in the story with Samantha, because you like learning about science as much as she does, right?"

#### 4. **Emotional Involvement**

In Step 3 we helped our child to consider that they might be able to connect with a character. During this step, if the atmosphere is still good for conversation, we are going to push the similarities with the media character a bit further. We are going to take a look at specific situations and emotions. We are going to take a look at issues that characters confronted and discuss solutions and emotional outcomes. Hopefully, through this step our children will be able to more deeply and emotionally be able to identify with a character.

We might ask questions such as:

- "Sally made up stories to try and make new friends. Do you think this was the right way to make friends? Why? What should she have done differently?"

- “How do you think Tom felt when he missed the goal and lost the soccer game for his team? What would you tell him? Do you ever feel like Tom?”
- “Which do you think made Samantha feel better, winning the science fair or making new friends at school? Do you ever feel like that? Why?”

#### 5. **Continued Conversations**

Always remember that helping children walk through trauma is not a sprint but a marathon. Do not get discouraged if the right time to talk about themes in a piece of media don't turn up right away. Do not get discouraged if your child doesn't want to talk about anything “deep” or life changing.

Some people have reported that their children might watch a movie, lightly discuss it, and then a month later begin asking deeper questions about a theme or topic in the media.

As parents our job is to create an atmosphere where learning and growth can happen AND CAN CONTINUE HAPPENING. We need to equip ourselves with the tools to be ready for those small windows of time that our children are ready to discuss and learn from us.

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## Comprehensive Review

# Transfiguring Adoption's Overview:

*Muppets Haunted Mansion* is a new short available on Disney+ offering some spooky fun without being too scary for young children. The target age range is elementary school-aged children, though as with other Disney and Muppet movies, it's definitely one that older children, teens and adults will likely enjoy as well. There are lots of fun references to the Disney World ride as well as other Muppet franchise content. There are, however, also frequent mentions of death, ghosts, and other Halloween spookiness that may bother more sensitive children so definitely something to keep in mind and might be one to avoid if your kiddos don't particularly enjoy those aspects of Halloween.

**\*\* Spoilers Could Be Ahead \*\***

## How Is This Relevant To Adoption & Foster Care?

The movie is not related to foster care. However, the main theme of the movie is about accepting and facing fears which is something that children in care may relate to. Gonzo, the main character, starts off feeling like he has to stay in a haunted mansion to prove that he's The Great Gonzo. He repeatedly states that he's not afraid of anything. However, he realizes there are a few things he is afraid of like being alone, that he'll never see his friends again, and that no one will care about him if he doesn't do dangerous stunts. Children who have experienced trauma may have a lot of fear and anxiety, but they may also feel like they can't express these fears because they don't feel safe doing so, they need to 'be strong' or protect others such as younger siblings. Because of this they may relate strongly to how Gonzo feels.

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## Discussion Points:

- **Care isn't something that has to be earned**

Early on in the movie Kermit says to Gonzo, "You don't have to be The Great Gonzo to be great, Gonzo." One of the reasons Gonzo decides to try the haunted mansion challenge is because he is trying to prove that he deserves the title and that he's fearless. Later, after some self-reflection, he finds out one of his fears is that his friends won't care about him unless he's doing dangerous stunts. He realizes that this isn't true and that his friends like him for who he is, and not because of tricks or what he does. This can be a great opportunity to talk to children about some of their own worries around having to earn friendship or love and that when people really care about you, you shouldn't have to try to impress them.



- **Acknowledging/Facing Fears**

A big theme in the movie is that Gonzo doesn't believe he's afraid of anything but his experience at a haunted house helps him realize that there are a few things he's afraid of – being alone, his friends not caring about him unless he does dangerous stunts, and not seeing his friends again. Just like Gonzo we all have fears of varying degrees even though sometimes we may not recognize or admit them. Children who have experienced trauma are even more likely to have a lot of things they might be afraid of or anxious about. Depending on their comfort level this could be an opportunity to talk about some of their own fears but if not, the conversation may need to stay focused on Gonzo and how he realizes and accepts his own fears. This could also be an opportunity to share that there are things that you're afraid of or worried about too, and that even adults get worried sometimes and that it's a very normal thing.

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## **Cautionary Points:**

- **Some Scary Imagery**

While the movie is only rated PG and it is The Muppets things don't get too scary but there are spooky elements including a haunted mansion, thunderstorms, graveyard, ghosts, spiders, etc. Even in cartoon form these elements may be frightening or upsetting to some children.

- **Frequent Mentions of Death and Ghosts**

The movie is set in The Haunted Mansion (like the Disneyworld ride) so there are ghosts frequently throughout the movie. Most of these are cartoons but there are a few that are live action actors including The Bride who plays a fairly large role. There's also a scene towards the beginning that takes place in the graveyard and various ghosts come out of their graves and sing about how they died. It's meant to be humorous but if children have recently experienced the loss of a loved one the graveyard, ghosts, and mentions of death may be a lot for them to handle.

- **Inappropriate Romantic Relationship**

The Bride is a ghost who tried to lure Pepe to his death by pretending to be in love with him. During these scenes she does things that seem to make him uncomfortable like feeding him spiders, but follows them up with reassurances that she loves him or romantic gestures to lure him back into acceptance of what is happening. This scene is somewhat creepy especially given that this romance is happening between someone who is clearly a grown woman and one of The Muppets who are somewhat ageless. Pepe's consent is also not 100% clear and the fact that we know she's planning to kill him after they're married just adds to the inappropriateness. It's clearly done in jest and not meant seriously, but for children who have been sexually abused or experienced grooming, manipulative or gaslighting behavior this storyline may be very triggering.

## Discussion Questions

1. **Do you have a favorite Muppet? Why do you like them the most?**

Caregiver Note: This is just a fun question to get the conversation going but it's a great opportunity for some bonding. The Muppets have been around a long time so chances are that you as a caregiver also have a favorite you can share with your child as you talk.

2. **Kermit and his friends are having a Halloween costume party and Gonzo is going to a Haunted House. What kinds of things do you like to do on Halloween?**

Caregiver Note: This is another fun bonding question. It can also be a great time to talk about your family's Halloween plans and maybe what your kiddo wants to dress up as if they haven't already decided. Holidays can be challenging for children in care, especially if this is the first Halloween they have spent with you. Maybe they have some special traditions or activities they enjoy that you can incorporate into your holiday plans. Given that Halloween also tends to involve some spookier aspects, talking about plans ahead of time can go a long way to ensuring that everyone is able to have a safe and fun celebration even if that might mean things look a little different than usual.

3. **Do you think Kermit is a good friend to Gonzo? How do the things he says and does show that?**

Caregiver Note: Kermit is clearly disappointed that Gonzo won't be able to make it to his party but he is also supportive of Gonzo's interests and accepts that his friend wants to do another activity instead. Kermit also tells Gonzo that he doesn't have to try to do impressive stunts in order to be great. He also mentions a few times that he misses Gonzo and hopes they can see each other soon. All of these are qualities of being a good friend. Sometimes when children have experienced trauma they struggle with all relationships, including friendships. Since they did not have healthy relationships modeled for them it may be hard for them to identify what a good friendship looks like. Having a conversation about how these characters are engaging in a positive and healthy relationship can be a great way to work on this skill.

4. **Kermit says, "You don't have to be The Great Gonzo to be great, Gonzo". What does he mean by this?**

Caregiver Note: As with the previous question this can be a great lead in to discussing positive friendship behaviors. Gonzo thinks that proving he's fearless by completing a Halloween challenge will make people like him better, but Kermit tells him that he doesn't have to try to impress him or do anything to prove his worth and that he is great just like he is. This is an important message for children of all ages to hear. Reiterate that your regard for them doesn't change based on things they do or don't do, but that you care about them just for being who they are.

5. **Gonzo says he isn't afraid of anything multiple times. Do you think this is really true?**

Caregiver Note: Oftentimes we equate being afraid of something as being 'weak' so in order not to seem this way we put on a brave face or claim that we aren't scared and Gonzo is no different. He learns later in the movie that he does have fears he didn't realize and more importantly that everyone is afraid of something (as discussed in the next question). Children who have experienced trauma might be even more likely to feel the need to not admit their own fears or worries to appear strong, maybe because they are uncomfortable being vulnerable or because they felt the need to protect younger siblings. As discussed below it's important to talk about how it's okay to be afraid or worried about things and that doesn't make them any less worthy of your love and support.

6. **The Host says "Everyone's afraid of something"- do you think this is true? Is there anything you think is scary?**

Caregiver Note: This is a great opportunity to share some of your own fears with your child, especially if they think that adults aren't afraid of anything. It's helpful to know that they aren't alone and everyone really does get scared from time to time. Kiddos might not be in a place where they are ready to share all their own fears with you and that's okay too! Depending on their own trauma experiences they may have some pretty big fears. But this can be a great time to remind them that if something does scare them, that you're a safe person to share those fears with whenever they are ready to do so.

7. **How does Gonzo escape from being trapped in Room 999? Does the fact that he escapes mean he isn't afraid anymore?**

Caregiver Note: Gonzo is able to escape the room by admitting and facing his fears, not necessarily overcoming them but just recognizing what the things he's afraid of are. This is a great example that emotions don't always have to be 'fixed' but that just recognizing them and acknowledging them is important and the first step to being able to move forward. This question can be used to start a conversation about how to engage in self-reflection and ways that you as a caregiver can help them identify and label their emotions similar to how the mirror Gonzo helps the real Gonzo realize what his fears are.

8. **ACTIVITY: Draw your own version of Room 999**

Caregiver Note: Room 999 is the room that shows Gonzo what his fears are. As with the previous questions children may not know what their fears are or may not be ready to talk about them. Sometimes when it comes to identifying emotions using pictures might be an easier way to express what they're feeling rather than words. If even this is too much, they can simply draw a Halloween picture that includes things that are common fears such as spiders, ghosts, etc. or they can illustrate Gonzo's fears or what they imagine the other characters might see if they went into Room 999.

9. **Gonzo knows he has to leave by sunrise or he will be trapped in the Haunted Mansion forever. Why does he stay even though he knows this? Do you think he did the right thing?**

Caregiver Note: Gonzo finds out that Pepe is still trapped inside and won't be able to get out without help. Gonzo decides he wants to help his friend, even if it means he won't win the competition. This can be a tricky one to talk about, however, because while helping those we care about is important (like Gonzo did when going back for Pepe), it's also important to take care of ourselves even if sometimes that feels a little selfish. This is especially hard for children who have experienced trauma as they tend to have less developed self-preservation instincts and may feel like their life or safety isn't as valuable as those around them.

10. **How do you think Gonzo feels when McGuffin tells him he's "the greatest"?**

Caregiver Note: McGuffin is someone whom Gonzo idolizes and thinks very highly of. Because of this it means a great deal to him when McGuffin praises Gonzo and tells him how great he is. Gonzo hears this from Kermit and Pepe, his friends, but there is a difference to hearing someone you look up to offer you praise. This can be a great opportunity to tell your kiddos the ways you think they are great and some of the positive qualities you see in them

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Jenn is a central Virginia native who received her BA in Psychology from the University of Virginia in 2012. Since then she has worked for a local mental health agency and the Department of Social Services in various capacities and has been involved in her community's efforts to create a Trauma Informed Network. Currently Jenn works in vocational rehab and mentors youth in foster care. When she isn't working, Jenn enjoys writing stories, anything and everything Harry Potter, and spending time with her nieces and nephew.