

FALL SPECIAL!

Safe & Healthy
TRICK-or-TREATING



Nutrition / Art Across the Spectrum / Sensory Processing Disorder

Autism FILE™

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Happy & Healthy Halloween!

Trick-or-treating can be extra frightening for parents of kids on the spectrum. Advance planning for comfort and safety can set the stage for fun and memorable moments....

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

Fall is arguably the most exciting time of year, every year. For some, it's the increasingly chilly air, gorgeous scenery, and juicy apples, followed by a smattering of beloved holidays celebrated with family and friends. For others, it's all about one special day in particular.

From what to be and how to act to where to trick-or-treat and which party or parade to attend, Halloween is tops for kids young and old, and for many adults too. And why not? It's silly, sure, but it's an opportunity to pretend, for just one day, to be someone or something else, whether spectacular, silly, or straightforward. It fosters creativity of all kinds, and encourages imagination.



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PREPARATION IS KEY

But Halloween is not without its perils. It can scare off even the most mainstream children (or parents), to say nothing of kids on the autism spectrum. Haunted houses, grotesque costumes, and groups of adolescents trolling the streets are all capable of making a person feel wary. While some kids on the autism spectrum might embrace this so-called holiday

and enjoy the exciting practice of trick-or-treating, others will be downright petrified of the break in routine, interacting with strangers, putting on a mask, and hearing the doorbell ring every five minutes.

The key is to prepare your child for what to expect on Halloween, and to make the experience as positive as possible. As with any departure from the norm, exposing ASD kids to

Halloween traditions early and often will help them better understand it, and so they will know what to expect in future years.

Also important: selecting the right costume—and I don't mean whether to dress up as a witch or a construction worker. Children with autism can be sensitive to fabrics and uncomfortable clothing, and this physical discomfort can lead to behavior problems that will ruin the day for everyone. Rather than force them to wear a restrictive, unfamiliar, full-body costume, The Autism Support Network advises adding a silly hat to an otherwise normal outfit, or wearing a funky "Halloween" t-shirt—anything that is nonthreatening and comfortable.

TOSS OUT THE TOXINS

Of course, make sure whatever costumes, makeup, or hair products ALL of your children use to enhance their Halloween style are free of the toxins

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Co-Founder/Co-Director of the Imus Cattle Ranch for Kids with Cancer. It is the only vegetarian working cattle ranch for kids with cancer. Deirdre is a *New York Times* multiple best-selling author and appears weekly on Imus in the Morning's Blonde on Blonde and Psychos. The Deirdre Imus Environmental Health Center® works to ensure children live the healthiest lives possible—today, tomorrow, and decades from now. In her quest to clean up the environment for our kids, Deirdre developed the award-winning Greening The Cleaning® program and product line, which replaces the hazardous ingredients commonly found in cleaning agents with environmentally-responsible, less toxic products wherever possible. The program and products are used throughout the country in schools, healthcare facilities, and businesses. ◀

that can make everyone sick, and that can exacerbate allergies and cause other health concerns. Ingredients to avoid include: unhealthy plastics containing lead and PVCs; phthalates; parabens; aluminum; and artificial colors and fragrances. Children are especially vulnerable to environmental toxins because they're not little adults. Pound for pound of body weight, they take in more air, water and food than adults. They also have frequent hand-to-mouth contact, which is of particular concern with Halloween costumes.

Opt for costumes made from natural fibers, or be even more sustainable and throw together an outfit from supplies you've already got in the house. Search for creative DIY costume ideas online, many of which promote the use of recycled materials. Boxes, craft paper, nontoxic paints, vintage clothing and accessories can all be used to create one-of-a-kind costumes. When making costumes, follow common-sense, age-appropriate safety precautions. The American Academy of Pediatrics has Safe Halloween Guidelines at: <http://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/Pages/Halloween-Safety-Tips.aspx>

Many middle and high school students would rather shop with their friends, and may find a local thrift shop as a useful resource. It can be a fun, artistic, and low-cost way to approach the holiday while also giving profits right back to charity. Kids of any age can also swap costumes with other families, or pass down costumes to younger family members to ensure they are re-used and enjoyed long after the holiday passes. Think outside the box, and encourage your kids to participate in the process.

Getting dressed up can be fun, and a great imaginative outlet, but it's not for all special needs children. Kids who don't want to wear a costume can get involved in the fun of Halloween in other ways: decorating the yard or the house; painting pictures of a scene from a Halloween story; or handing out candy or another treat at the door.

DEALING WITH THE DOWNSIDE

There is much to love about Halloween, but unfortunately there is one major downside. Halloween's most beloved, most famous tradition involves collecting as much sugary, processed candy as possible and then gorging on it—that night, and the next, and probably for the entire subsequent week. It can



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be difficult to dissuade young kids of the notion that they are entitled to these so-called "treats," especially when their friends are doing the same.

Try making a deal with your kids beforehand about what and how much candy they are allowed, and pick a date post-Halloween when it all gets thrown out. Many dentists participate in the Halloween Candy Buyback program, which offers kids a certain amount of money (usually around one dollar per pound) in exchange for uneaten Halloween candy. The candy is then shipped in care packages to U.S. troops overseas, as part of Operation Gratitude. What's more, it promotes the importance of

dental hygiene, and highlights the risks posed by eating candy.

Have healthy snacks on hand to distribute at your own home, such as individually wrapped dark chocolate squares, or organic homemade cookies. The website MamaNatural.com recommends individual honey sticks, Annie's Fruit Snacks (made without artificial dyes or other nasty stuff), or fruit leather made from 100 percent real fruit. Another fan favorite, especially among little kids, is stickers! They're easy to distribute, easy on the wallet, and easy on your conscience.

ADDRESS ANXIETIES

For some kids on the autism spectrum, interacting with strangers is about as scary as it gets, to say nothing of the bizarre range of costumes trick-or-treaters are liable to wear. The Autism Support Network suggests keeping the lights on outside so that your child can witness some truly stunning costumes, and perhaps recognize there is nothing to be afraid of. If this becomes overwhelming, simply turn off the lights and go inside.

Experts also suggest Halloween trial runs for kids with autism—taking them through the routine of going door-to-door, or answering the doorbell and interacting with people, a few days in advance so that when October 31st arrives they will know what to expect. The Autism Support Network also recommends avoiding overstimulation (for any child, really) by limiting time spent trick-or-treating; carrying a flashlight in case it gets dark and ear plugs in case it gets loud; and bringing a comfort toy in case your child gets upset.

Once Halloween is over, seize the opportunity to create an art project with your ASD child—a collage, a diorama, or a drawing—detailing what the experience was like for them. You can reinforce the non-threatening nature of the day, and provide your loved one the chance to let go of some of the anxiety they might have felt, or are still feeling, and begin to prepare for next year! ◀