

Making Halloween Special for Children with Special Needs

Halloween is in the air! For many, Halloween excitement begins the very first day October starts. Children begin talking about costumes and trick-or-treating. But not all children share in this excitement. Being a child with special needs can be particularly difficult on any given day, especially around certain holidays such as Halloween. For some children and their families, Halloween can bring anxiety and stress. Halloween can be particularly scary, especially for children with Autism, sensory issues, or anxiety. The masks, crowds, fast pace, scary costumes, and decorations can be overwhelming. So don't worry so much about how to make your child fit into the traditional Halloween experience. You can create traditions of your own that work just as well. Here are some tips to help reduce the anxiety and enhance the fun:

1. Children benefit from knowing what's going to happen. Prepare your child for the Halloween schedule. Talk about when you will go trick-or-treating, where you will go, and what may be seen, said, or heard.
2. Take your child to the Halloween section of a store and show your child the kind of scary or funny costumes that people may be wearing. Maybe your child wants to try some of them on? You could even try making a game of it, like, "Let's see how many witches, superheroes, and goblins we'll get to see on Halloween."
3. Go through a dress rehearsal. Let them put on their costume and practice saying "trick-or-treat" and "thank you".
4. Prepare younger children by reading books about Halloween. Some suggestions on books for early learners include What is Halloween?, by Harriet Ziefert and My First Halloween, by Tomie DePaola. You could also use a "Social Story". "Social Stories" give children specific information about what they should expect and how they should respond. AbilityPath.org has a free download of a Halloween Social Story. Feel free to use this one or expand on it and add in your own details.
5. For children with sensory issues, have them wear their costume around the house for a while. You will come to learn ahead of time which itchy tag or fabric may need to be modified. If they like a costume, but can't tolerate the mask, you can put the mask on a stick and have them hold it instead of wearing it on their face. On the day of Halloween, you may also want to bring along a soft Halloween themed outfit for them to wear in case he/she can no longer tolerate the costume.
6. Many children express the fear of not having anybody to go trick-or-treating with, so the sooner those plans are made, the less anxious you and your child will be as the day approaches. Contact parents early to arrange for a group that would make your child most comfortable.
7. Plan your route carefully. Quiet side streets may be more successful than the main streets. You may want to avoid homes with flashing lights, loud noises or particularly scary decorations. You may also want to consider only going to those houses with family and friends.
8. Plan ahead for things you know will be particularly difficult. If your child has speech difficulties or is anxious speaking, you could make "trick-or-treat" and "thank you" cards that they can use.

9. If you're going in a group, have a code word that your child can use in case they become overwhelmed or need a break. Honor the code word by taking your child away from the stressful situation. You could always meet back up with friends at a later point.
10. Try reverse trick-or-treating. Dress your child up at home and invite family and friends over to give your child candy as your child answers the door saying "trick-or-treat." Your child can experience all the fun without leaving the house. This option is great for children with mobility issues who can't get around or keep up with the trick-or-treating crowd that runs from house to house.
11. If your child has strict dietary restrictions, you may want to drop off some non-food items or safe items at the houses you know you will be visiting. This also gives you the opportunity to let your neighbors know that you're coming ahead of time.
12. Pay attention to your child's signals and body language. Be prepared to go back home when you see signs that you're child has had enough, before a meltdown occurs. For many kids, it can be just as fun, and less threatening, for your child to hand out candy at home.
13. Lucky for us, this year Halloween is on a Saturday! So it's easier to head out before dark to go trick-or-treating, which can make all the difference for some children.

No matter how much you plan, the only certainty is that children always seem to find something you didn't plan for. So take a deep breath and expect the unexpected. At best, you'll learn another thing to plan for next year's Halloween. For those of you that do not have special needs children, you will most definitely come into contact with children who do. All kinds of children may be visiting your home. Keep an open mind so that you don't make assumptions about children's behavior. That being said, here is the best advice I have seen (author unknown) about understanding the needs of all children:

"Be accepting. The child who is grabbing more than one piece of candy might have poor fine motor skills. The child who takes forever to pick out one piece of candy may have motor planning issues. The child who does not say "trick-or-treat" or "thank you" may be non-verbal. The child who looks disappointed when they see your bowl may have an allergy. The child who isn't wearing a costume may have sensory issues. Be nice. Be patient. It's everyone's Halloween."

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