

Trick-or-Treat Safely with Autistic Children

By Jenna Ekdahl ©October 28, 2011

Planning the couple hours of Halloween night can take weeks of preparation as it is, but planning the night for autistic children takes even more special care.

"My best advice is to keep your plans flexible and kind of go with whatever your son or daughter wants to do, whether it be two houses or 20," said Mike Grant, organizer with the Autism Cares Foundation, based in Richboro. "Something we learned the hard way is my son needs to know what's going on and what's going to happen. We make it a multi-day event."

Grant said his family generally begins talking about trick-or-treating a couple days ahead of time, laying out a game plan and acquainting his son Dylan with what Halloween night will be like. He also said at first his son couldn't grasp the concept of visiting different houses for short periods of time instead of going in, sitting down and staying a while.

"For him it was mind boggling," Grant said.

The Central Pennsylvania Autism Resource Center has prepared eight tips for families going trick-or-treating with autistic children.

"The very things that can be so exciting to neurotypical kids ... can be anxiety producing for children with autism spectrum disorders," a press release said.

Here some things parents can do ahead of time to help their child enjoy this child-focused occasion:

1. Begin early to prepare your child for Halloween activities. Read a story about Halloween and the activities that surround it like carving pumpkins, wearing costumes, and trick-or-treating. Teach your child the skills involved in participating - knocking on the door, holding out the bag, saying "trick or treat" or using assistive technology (a picture or device) to communicate the message, and then saying "thank you."

2. Help your child choose a costume that will reflect his interests. Let him practice wearing the costume around the house while practicing the skills. If wearing a costume is irritating, ask him if he would rather wear face paint, a scarf, or a hat on Halloween. No costume is also okay.

3. Write a social narrative describing what your child will do on Halloween. Include in this story information about wearing the costume (if she will) or face paint and carrying the trick-or-treat bag. Identify which houses your child will visit, what your child will say at each house, and what she will do with the treats she receives.

4. Create a visual schedule with the Halloween activities marked on it.

5. Let your child practice trick-or-treating with familiar individuals and houses. If he has a restricted diet, give these individuals special treats for him.

6. Keep the trick-or-treating session short and comfortable. If two houses are her limit, that is fine.

7. Teach your child to give out candy for trick-or-treaters. Use role play to let him practice the skill before Halloween. Write a social narrative about this aspect of Halloween so he will know what to expect and what to do when the doorbell rings that evening. This way, even if his trick-or-treating session is short, he will be involved in the celebration.

8. Remember, practice helps make any activity feel like a routine!

