



Halloween

ON THE

Spectrum



A Few Tips and Tricks

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Of all the holidays on the calendar, perhaps no other is as fraught with possible difficulties for some people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder as Halloween.

What can be seen as simply a fun opportunity to dress up, have a party and engage in fun activities like “Trick or treating” for most can be confusing and overwhelming and lead to behavioral difficulties for some students diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum.

Here are a few tips from Proud Moments’ Executive Clinical Director, Bobby Newman, PhD, BCBA-D and our team of clinical professionals, to help keep Halloween fun for all. Overall, it’s important that revelers on the spectrum are taught that they can ‘opt out’ at any time, should they become overwhelmed or no longer want to participate.



1. When it comes to the costume, plan ahead for unfamiliar circumstances:

Wearing new and different textures and unfamiliar requirements such as having a full facial mask or makeup can be difficult for those with sensory sensitivities. Some extra work to get used to wearing the unfamiliar textures may be helpful. This is not something to introduce on Halloween itself, but rather something to work up to in the days and weeks before.

BOO!

2. Watch out for Sound Sensitivities:

For those with sound sensitivities, the doorbell constantly ringing with “trick or treaters” can be disconcerting. Similarly, those who are used to typical patterns, and the afternoon/evening of Halloween can be anything but typical in terms of interruptions, loud noises, barking dogs and the like, may have difficulties with the constant visitors.



3. Expect Fear-based Reactions:

Some costumes can be disconcerting, either just because they are unfamiliar or because they tap into some particular fear. Similarly, seeing people such as teachers and therapists, who are expected to look a particular way looking very different can be disconcerting to some, as can variations on an expected theme such as ‘Trunk or Treat’ traditions in some parts of the country.

4. Crowds and extra cheering may be an overload:

There are many more people on the streets and there are sometimes “costume parades” or similar at schools; this can be difficult for those with difficulties with crowds/noise. This can be a compounded difficulty if a student has not been prepared, in terms of having to wear their own costume (see #1 above) or if others are wearing potentially frightening costumes (see #3). Well meaning adults who are cheering or otherwise drawing extra attention/looking to take photographs, etc. can be difficult.

5. Practice in advance communication for the day of:

Something that may be perceived as basic, such as being able to say “trick or treat” or to communicate it with a picture or other communication device, should be taught in advance. If a child is being asked to practice what they have never been taught, in a situation that could be perceived as on-demand, trouble can occur.



6.

Teach the rule of ‘take one only’ before the bonanza occurs:



Many adults will hold up a bowl of candy – which is seen as a reward – and simply say “take one” or “pick what you like.” If the response to such a prompt has never been taught, a student may try to grab multiple items and be confused for being reprimanded or looked upon unfavorably, if they have never been taught how to respond.

7.

Teach that this is a unique day of the year in approaching ‘strangers’:

We often have to struggle with teaching “stranger danger” and balancing being appropriate with those who are not familiar to us. On this one day a year, however, children are encouraged to go up to complete strangers and ask for items and to take them. It must be taught that this is a very special and unique circumstance.

8.

Prepare for the reality that not everyone will engage:



Some houses will not answer the doorbell and some people do not participate in the festival/holiday for religious or other reasons. It’s important that children understand and are prepared for this when it inevitably occurs. Similarly, it’s important that neighbors understand that individuals on the spectrum may have ‘opted out’ of wearing a costume in general, and may want to still enjoy the festivities.



Each of these challenges can be addressed and the necessary skills can be taught, with practice, patience and accommodation. We can all look for encouragement to one particular scenario familiar to Proud Moments, where a teenager with ASD “trick or treats” in his neighborhood on October 30th to avoid some of the pitfalls above. Each year, his neighbors are prepared to greet him and supply treats as though it were the 31st. Now, that’s neighborly!

Here’s hoping your Halloween is a fun and safe event for your entire family!