

ENJOYING HALLOWEEN WITH SENSORY CHALLENGES



BETWEEN 5% AND 15% OF CHILDREN in the general population demonstrate difficulties with sensory processing—the interpretation of and response to sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and perception of movement and position.

If you are the parent, relative, educator, or friend of one of these children, you know that modifying the activities and the environment can help them enjoy an activity and manage their challenges. But how do you adapt the environment and activities so children can live life to its fullest on Halloween? The following tips are from pediatric occupational therapy practitioners who have experience with addressing sensory challenges.

If you would like to:

Consider these activity tips:

Help your child know what to expect.

Prepare your child for the holiday by discussing some of the associated traditions and activities. Read a book, create a story, or role play. Many Halloween traditions clash with established rules, like taking candy from strangers. To help your child understand what Halloween is—and is not—review your values and establish rules and boundaries.

Have your child wear a costume.

Remember that “pretend” does not necessarily involve elaborate costuming. For example, a simple green shirt may suffice to indicate a turtle. Before shopping, discuss costume guidelines so your child’s expectations are clear. Be sure costumes aren’t too scratchy, tight, slippery, or stiff. Test your child’s comfort when walking, reaching, and sitting. Costumes that are too long or too loose pose tripping and fire hazards. Consider whether your child will be too warm or too cold in character, and whether he or she will also need a coat. If your child has facial sensitivity, avoid make-up and masks. Masks can also occlude vision.

Take your child trick or treating.

Trick or treating is not mandatory: Meaningful participation in Halloween festivities could include helping to roast pumpkin seeds or picking apples. Choose activities that best fit your child’s sensory needs.

If you want to try trick or treating, focus on a quiet street with sidewalks. Trick or treating while it’s still light out helps to reduce anxiety and increase safety.

Practice the sequence of walking to the door, saying “trick or treat,” putting the treat in the bag, and saying “thank you.” If possible, go only to homes of family and friends to keep the comfort level high. Skip homes with flashing lights, loud noises, and scary decorations. Eating candy while trick or treating can be a choking hazard or trigger allergies, so review ground rules before leaving home. Often, children enjoy handing out candy as much as receiving it.

**If you
would like to:**

Consider these activity tips:

Have your child
participate in a party.

At Halloween parties, some children enjoy wet or sticky textures like pumpkin filling and skinless grapes, whereas these make others feel uncomfortable and even nauseous. Instead of carving a pumpkin, decorate a jack o' lantern with stickers and markers. A child who won't enjoy bobbing for apples can put the apples in a bucket. Consider planning an event at home with a few friends. Small groups present an opportunity to socialize. A short, successful outing is always preferable to a longer stay that leads to a "meltdown."

Help your child
avoid a meltdown.

Limit the duration and number of people and activities. Give your child choices and advance notice of the sequence of events. Help your child learn to advocate by practicing phrases like "when is my turn?" or "please don't touch me." Know when to stop or disengage from the festivities by recognizing sensory overload—fatigue, hyper excitability, crying, combativeness, etc.—and immediately go to a quieter, smaller space.

Need More Information?

Pediatric occupational therapy practitioners work in schools, clinics, and community-based settings to support children with and without disabilities and their families to participate in daily routines and activities. Children with sensory processing challenges may experience difficulty engaging in holiday traditions and other events, and occupational therapy practitioners can help.

To learn more, visit the Web site of the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org and contact your pediatrician, school personnel, and community resources.



Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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