

Halloween Safety ~ The Kidpower Way!

A Grab Bag of Safety Treats and Tricks for Your Family!

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For families that celebrate Halloween, this is a special holiday, full of fun and adventure. Most children love the excitement of dressing up in costumes, pretending to be something or someone different, going to places that are festive and decorated, and gathering treats with their adults. Halloween isn't like any other day, and all the wonderful things that make it special and exciting can also lead to problems that might be unpleasant or even dangerous. A little bit of planning ahead of time can make a huge difference in making sure that everybody has a great time.

Here are eight tips for enjoying Halloween safely – The **Kidpower Way!**

I. Stay Focused on Your Children's Needs. The purpose of Halloween is to have fun, not to create upset. We want children to have a happy time, not a miserable one. This often means making things simpler and separating adult celebrations from children's celebrations. For example, Halloween is often a time for friends and family to enjoy seeing each other, but when adults are in charge of keeping children safe from harm, this is not the best time to be drinking or serving alcohol or getting into involved conversations.

Make sure that celebration activities work for children where they are emotionally, without pressuring them to be different. Sometimes adults and older children think it's funny to act spooky and weird. It's okay to

joke and pretend to be frightened, but remind everyone that being really scared is *not* fun and that it is against your rules to tease anyone about being nervous or frightened. In a mixed group, the needs of the most vulnerable person should be honored ahead of the wishes of anyone else.

Remember that children are different and that less is often more. Some children like going out. Some prefer to stay home and greet others. It's better to enjoy doing a few things than trying to do too much and ending up with an exhausted overwhelmed child.

Be clear on your priorities: *Safety comes first, comfort comes second, and fun comes third!*

2. Be Aware of Costume Safety. Many costumes, although beautiful or exciting to look at, are simply miserable to wear after a few minutes. They can be easy to trip on and make it hard to see. Unfamiliar shoes, ties, strings, wings, capes, gloves, and fabric that differs from normal (i.e. a shirt made with a bit of fiber filling to make puffy looking muscles) all affect movement. You also have to watch out for other people's costume parts sticking out or whirling as they turn around.

Add the costume challenge to going to unfamiliar places with steep steps, kids of higher skill level rushing past, crowds, and there is the potential for *lots* of falls. Unless they are in a very controlled environment for a very short time, masks and high-heeled shoes are a bad idea for most younger children. A simpler costume can make the difference between a fun adventure and a miserable disaster.

It can be fun to dress up yourself and to see other adults be dressed up. Remember that young children especially need stability and having their adults dressed up can be strange or potentially upsetting. Make sure your costume, if you decide to have one, makes it easy to for you to move around, too! Be okay with taking your costume off if it upsets your child. Some costumes are truly terrifying and should not be worn around younger children.

Another costume hazard involves fire from Jack O' Lanterns, candles, flame-lit walkways, heaters, and stoves. Costumes have lots of dangly pieces. Children need to stay aware of their bodies and their 'appendages' including their bags. Even though they might normally be careful around the stove or the heater, they are not accustomed to adjusting their distance and will probably need to be reminded.

3. Watch Out for Cars. Drivers are often distracted at a time when children are more likely to behave unpredictably. Children are focused on looking in their bags, keeping up with their groups and getting more candy. If they are wearing a mask, they will lose their peripheral vision. Things look different because it's dark instead of light. Even older kids are very 'in the moment' and might impulsively cross in a spot where they wouldn't normally go because they suddenly see a friend.

A good strategy is to go in a group with other adults and responsible older children so you can work together to keep everyone safe. Appoint a "Leader" and "Duster" with the rule that no one passes the Leader of the group and that the Duster makes sure he/she can see the whole group ahead and 'dusts along' those at the end. The Duster should be an adult.

This is a time for setting constant clear boundaries, such as, "We're not going to cross that street without checking in as a whole group and agreeing we're ready. If we get separated, stand there."

Flashlights and glow sticks for both children and adults can make it easier for people to see each other and increases visibility for drivers. Use extra caution when you are driving. If you are a passenger, support the driver in staying focused on the road and not getting distracted.

4. Keep Cats and Dogs Inside and OUT of the Action. For both their own safety and the safety of everyone, cats and dogs need to be kept away from the activities during Halloween. Even normally very calm friendly animals can become upset because people are looking and acting different. They might bite or scratch – or panic and get hit by a car.

Even at home with their own families, dogs and cats are not in their normal environment. It's unfair to expect them to respond as they usually do when nothing is the same. They sense all the differences and might become alarmed or aggressive: new smells, lots of energy, and lots of food down low, in bags and close to young faces. A dog going for food by a face can be really scary, even if the dog is just trying to get the food and not the person.

When visiting other homes, remember that some people bring their dogs to the front door. Just because owners have complete -- and even perhaps justified -- faith in their dog's behavior doesn't mean it isn't really scary to be a little kid looking up to suddenly be face to face with an unknown dog. Startled children might suddenly back up on a crowded stoop full of kids a few steps above ground level, leading quickly to a precarious situation.

It is safest to keep children away from dogs during Halloween, no matter what the owner says and even if the dog seems safe at that moment.

5. Take Extra Precautions to Avoid Getting Lost. Halloween is noisy, often dark, and, if a child is worried about being lost, those costumes that looked funny before might look scary. Keep track of each child in your care every second of the time you are out.

Remember that what you see and your child sees are different. Even if your child is easily visible to you, watch for that look of anxiety when your child isn't quite sure where you are. Barriers like costumes and other people can block a child's regular line of vision to your face. Even in a very familiar neighborhood, it's may be dark out and the decorated houses look different.

Respond early, using your voice as a beacon of safety. Be ready to call out in a loud, cheerful, matter-of-fact voice, using your child's name, "Jesse! Jesse! I'm here. Hi!" Don't call out left and right directions, but keep talking in a loud conversational tone.

Before going out, make a special Halloween Safety Plan in case your child does get lost. Make the plan specific to the age and abilities of the child and where you are going to be. For example, a plan might be, "Look for a grown-up with kids your age, a flashlight and regular-looking clothes. Ask the grown-up to call my cell if you can. If that doesn't work, wait on the doorstep on the nearest house with lots decorations and light."

Some parents will write their cell phone number with a magic marker on a younger child's arm. Any plan that uses a cell phone needs to have a back-up plan.

6. Review Stranger Safety Rules. During Halloween, children are encouraged to talk to strangers and take candy from them. This is fine, because you are there with them. Even if the adults you visit are people that YOU know, don't assume that they aren't strangers to your child - some of them will probably LOOK pretty strange!

Give children clear guidelines and rules specific to what you will be doing. For example, "We are going to be talking to lots of strangers and people we don't know well. That's fine, because I KNOW you are talking to strangers! Our rule is not that you DON'T talk to strangers but that your grown-ups want to KNOW.

Today, while I am with you, you can talk to any strangers who answer the door. We aren't going to people's houses to stay and visit so we won't go in."

7. Avoid a Halloween Meltdown. Remember that Halloween is often VERY exciting and overwhelming BEFORE trick-or-treating time. Most children, especially if they are in school, might have already had a parade and a party during the day. Make choices on the number of activities you choose to participate in.

For most children, routines are very important for them to feel happy and to stay safe with their bodies. To prevent meltdowns, go early and give children some time to wind down before trying to get them to go to sleep. For example, if children normally go to bed at 8 pm, let them stay up a little later if you wish, but try to still have them in bed by 8:30 or so. Keep normal bedtime habits like taking a bath and reading a story before going to sleep.

8. Make a Plan About the Treats. To avoid disappointment and upset stomachs, make a plan ahead of time for what to do with that bag of goodies. Teach children to focus on the joy of gathering treats without feeling the need to eat most of them, especially right away.

Most treats, especially if they're not homemade, have lots of chemicals, fat, and sugar. Read labels carefully. If your child is allergic to something that is in most treats, like milk or soy, buy some favorite treats and trade after the trick-or-treating is done.

Make a plan that encourages wise choices. For example, "You get to eat ONE yummy treat tonight and we'll save the rest for later. What do you want it to be? Barbara next door makes your favorite chocolate cupcakes. Is it okay with you to have that be today's treat?"

If your family ends up with too much candy, discuss other good ways of using it instead of eating it all. Children might donate some of it to a local shelter, trade each piece with you for a quarter so you can have a bowl of candy for customers at work, or turn it in an art project.

Authorities say that most (or all) stories about strangers poisoning or putting razor blades in Halloween candy turned out not to be true. Still, use common sense. Put aside any treats that look suspicious to you for any reason.