



“TRICKS” FOR MAKING HALLOWEEN A “TREAT”

By Karen Kabaki-Sisto, M.S. CCC-SLP

Bring on Halloween! - the holiday that sets kids on a quest for near-limitless assortments of candy while dressed as their favorite characters, princesses, and superheroes! But sometimes kids with autism may feel excluded, especially due to confusion about acceptable communication and social skills. As a Speech-Language Pathologist and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) instructor for over 20 years, every Halloween I see kids' and parents' frustration. Here are some “tricks” to make Halloween a carefree “treat” for your child, along with you as the parent, to truly understand, enjoy, and make happy memories together.

START EARLY! BEFORE HALLOWEEN:

During the Halloween season, use a wide variety of descriptive words to talk about we can have all have fun socializing together. Explain how kids and some adults “dress up” in “costumes” or “disguises” because all year long we wear “regular people” clothes and don’t “hide” our faces and heads. Halloween is the day that everyone at the same time can have fun to “make believe” or “pretend” to be someone or something else.



Talk about how everyone will have fun looking at all of the different costumes and that some children will even be wearing the same ones. Look through a costume catalog together while exploring descriptions like “scary,” “pretty,” “yucky,” or “funny” from which he or she can choose. If your son picks a favorite superhero, compare unique abilities that are the same and different from his own, like, “Superheroes can fly because they have ‘super’ or ‘magical’ powers, but people cannot”; “Superheroes are strong just like you because you eat ‘super’ or ‘nutritious’ or ‘powerful’ foods.” If your daughter wants to be a mermaid, ask her to describe the similarities between them, like being able to swim, and the differences, like the mermaid’s lack of legs. Discuss the traits of your child’s chosen character, like how a doctor helps sick people get better or how a cat is able to jump really high. If it’s a homemade costume, the process of making decisions about the clothing, makeup, and hair allows your child to think creatively and use expressive language to voice his opinions of how it should look.

ON HALLOWEEN, TRICK OR TREATING :

Remind your child to walk with the group not only for safety but also for the experience of seeing the different candies everyone receives, speaking with the kids, neighbors, and community helpers, and having fun together.

Based on your previous conversations about Halloween, point out all of the interesting costumes, and model compliments such as, "Wow! That kid has a huge clown nose. Tell him that his huge clown nose is so funny!" or "Cool! Look at that kid's pirate beard - it looks real. Do you want to tell him?"

Review these instructions for when he's at the doorstep of each new house:

- "If the door is closed, you will either knock on the door or ring the doorbell."
- "If the door is already opened, you won't knock on the door or ring the doorbell."
- "Stay outside the house at the neighbor's door, even though at other times we usually enter someone's house."

Plan the introductory script by using one, or use combinations of:

- "Hi!"
- "Trick or treat!"
- "Happy Halloween!"

Establish candy-receiving rules:

- "Wait until the neighbor or community helper gives you the candy because it's not yours yet to take."
- "The person will put candy in your bag, allow you to take from bowl, or hand it to you."
- "If the neighbor allows you to pick the candy, choose quickly and take only one piece because there are a lot of kids who are waiting for their candy too, and you need to be sure there is enough for them."
- "If you don't like the kind of candy the person gave you, only say, 'Thank you.'"
- "On Halloween only and only with a parent or

caregiver can you approach and accept candy from 'neighbors' and/or 'community helpers' like at the mall or library. Other days you cannot approach or accept candy from people."

Neighbors or community helpers:

Explain to your child, "Neighbors or community helpers enjoy seeing the kids' costumes so much that they want to give them a gift – or a 'treat'. So, they give kids candy as a gift or a treat because they know kids love candy. They might be interested to talk about your costumes and the characters you are pretending to be."

Prepare your child for the following questions:

- "What candy would you like?"
- "What/who are you?" (which means, "What is the thing you are pretending to be?" or "Who is your character?")
- "What does [your character] do?"

Based on your previous conversations with your child, he or she will be prepared to answer:

- "I'm a clown, and I like to do funny things to make people laugh."
- "I wanted to be a lion because lions roar so loudly."
- "I'm a character from my favorite video game."

Also, explain to your child that the person might give a compliment for which your child will acknowledge and optionally add a comment that you've discussed previously:

- "Thanks. I love my sparkly gown too."
- "Thank you. My mom and I made this costume."
- "Thanks. I wish I could fly like a superhero."
- "Thank you. I want to be a doctor when I grow up to help people feel better."

Plan the farewell script by using one, or use combinations of:

- "Thanks!"
- "Happy Halloween!"

EXPERIENCE WHAT GIVING FEELS LIKE:

It's very valuable to have your child in the reverse role of the one who is giving out the candy. Practiced ahead of time, explain to your child, "You are also a neighbor of other children who come to your own house for trick-or-treating." After your child had the experience of being the trick-or-treater, come home a little early. With his costume removed, he can now take the position of the neighbor. Since he knows what to expect, he learns flexibility from a different viewpoint: Review the introductory script and use one, or combinations of:

- "Hi!"
- "Happy Halloween!"
- (but not "Trick-or-treat!")
- Your child, as the candy-giver, can ask:
- "What candy would you like?"
- "What/who are you?"
(which means, "What is the thing you are pretending to be" or "Who is your character?")
- "What does [your character] do?"
- Your child can give a compliment:
- "I like your costume."
- "Your ballerina costume is so pretty."
- "You are a very scary shark."

Review the farewell script using one, or combinations of:

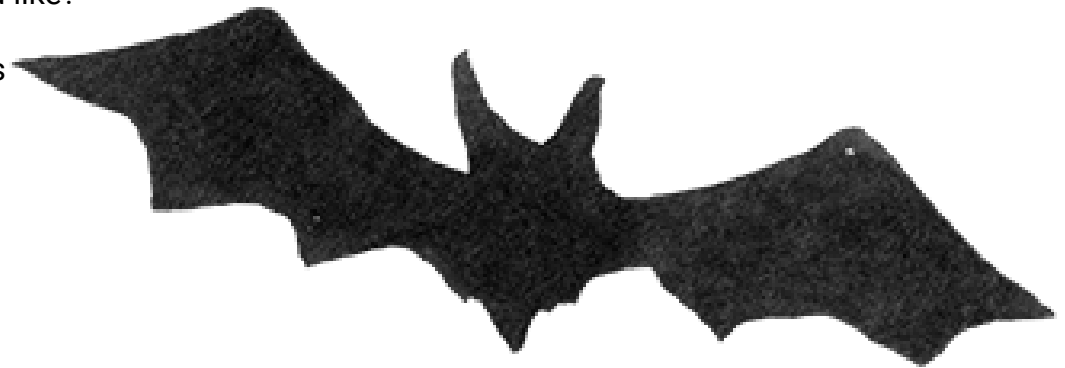
- "You're welcome!"
- "Happy Halloween!"
- (but not "Thanks!")

AFTER HALLOWEEN:

A short time after Halloween, discuss experiences to share memories and have conversations:

- "I wonder why we saw so many pirate costumes but no sailor costumes...they both travel on the water...hmmm..."
- "Grandma didn't go trick-or-treating with us, so she doesn't know that the neighbor's dog was trying to eat the candy out of your bag. I'm sure Grandma would like to laugh about this. Let's call her on the phone so you can tell her about this funny thing that happened."

With these suggestions, you as the parent can help your child enjoy the magic and wonderment of Halloween. After all, children are the owners of this fun-filled holiday!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Karen Kabaki-Sisto, M.S. CCC-SLP, is a certified Speech-Language Pathologist and Applied Behavior Analysis instructor. For over 20 years, Karen has been helping people with autism improve their communication abilities. In 2015, she invented and launched "I Can Have Conversations With You!™", a life-changing social language therapy system for the iPad to help people with autism make sense of words, gestures, and feelings to have confident conversations while building stronger social relationships. Learn more at www.iCanForAutism.com.