

Ask Nurse Rona: Healthy Halloween

Rona Renner, RN, for the Bay Area Discovery Museum

Question: *I like to make holidays special for my children, but I also want them to be healthy, and of course not to be greedy and grabby – and I'm finding that Halloween is particularly challenging trying to balance these competing ideals. Help!*

Answer: One goal in raising children is to move to middle ground parenting while setting limits. We want our children to have fun and be creative, and it's up to us to set guidelines and communicate our values to keep them safe, healthy, and happy. In my opinion there is no reason your child can't have an exciting and memorable Halloween while learning some manners, getting lots of exercise walking door-to-door, and keeping cavities at bay.

Halloween was one of my kid's favorite holidays. We didn't spend a lot of money on costumes but had fun with make-up and accessories. Starting at a young age we taught them to say "Happy Halloween" as a person opened the door and "Thank you" every time they got a treat. They were amazed that strangers would give them candy, and were so happy to see them. Afterwards they would come back to the house with a friend to count and exchange their treasures. There are different ways parents can set limits. Here are some examples:

- Eat as much as you want for three days, and then the candy is given or thrown away. Our children's dentist suggested parents not spread the candy out over weeks.
- Eat as much as you want that night and then throw the rest away.
- Eat ten pieces on Halloween night and then one or two pieces each day for a week
- Other parents don't set any limits and let the candy stay in a child's room or it's put in a bowl for anyone in the family to eat.
- Eat some and then turn the rest into mom or dad for a small prize or fun night out.
- Eat some and then donate the rest to a homeless shelter.

You can also give out gifts like stickers or pencils to set an example of fun things that aren't candy. There are healthier alternatives such as raisins or fruit, but I have to say I still have fond memories of the wonderful candy that I usually didn't get any other time of the year.

Discuss the rules ahead of time, so there aren't surprises that will ruin the fun of the evening. How you set limits will be based on your child's age, temperament, health, and your values. Once you set the limits beware of the strong willed child who will try and talk you out of it.

As the holiday season approaches remember that you can include your children in making wonderful meals for your family, friends, and for others who are less fortunate. And when your children beg for more sweets or gifts stay calm and remember that it's what kids often do, and instead of getting angry just remind them of the limits, take a deep breath, and have fun with your kids.