

Opportunities for Character Development come wrapped in a Halloween Costume

Remember when Halloween meant your mom was either going to cut holes in a white pillow case to transform you into a ghost or you wore all black with a cape and poof - you were a bat!? Remember when the only activity to celebrate Halloween was trick-or-treating and eating the candy as you went from house to house without a care?

Today, things are very different for our kids and for us as parents! Now we get a 20 page catalog in the mail from Party City with every imaginable super hero, villain, princess or fairy costume! (Slightly overwhelming for the child who has trouble making decisions!) For the older set we have the added enticement of the Pop-up Halloween stores like Halloween Scene which carry costumes that can make even Alice-in-Wonderland seem dirty! And on top of that, there are the social stressors that surround the numerous activities associated with Halloween. It is so critical that we as parents help our children navigate the social waters of this potentially stressful season. I will share with you some of the most common difficulties that have been shared with me and some ways for us to support our children so that there are less "Tricks" and more "Treats" at Halloween.

One major issue that rears its ugly head at this time of the year is the issue of inclusion and exclusion. Often times, children decide they would like to dress alike or dress as members of a group for their Halloween costumes. This invariably creates a problem with someone being left out of the group. It is important to ask your child who is involved and if they've considered everyone when planning this group costume. If you know of someone being left out, suggest to your child that they include the other child in the group in some way. This helps them develop the ability to take another's perspective and to be inclusive of others. The positive feeling they will get from the child who is being included will be the best "treat" your child could get at Halloween.

Another issue that is as common place as pumpkins and black cats during this month is that of commitment. I frequently hear the laments of students who say, "We agreed that we would be devils together and now she/he said they want to be something else with someone else!!" These children are disappointed and disillusioned in the friendship they had with the other child. Even if there has been a falling out between the children which prompted the one child to want to change costumes and abandon that friend, it is important for us as parents to point out the importance of

commitment to a friend. Children need to learn that it is not always easy to do the right thing, but when you make a promise to someone, it is very important to follow through on that promise. Knowing that you will not support their decision to drop that friend and change costumes may prompt your child to think of a way to work out the conflict that may have arisen between the two children instead of simply walking away from the commitment. And aren't problem solving and conflict resolution skills what we truly want our children to develop as they grow and mature?

Now what if your child is the one who is left out of a group or has not been approached by anyone to go trick-or-treating with them? This pain can be worse than the stake through the vampire's heart for us parents to bear, but again it gives us the chance to provide our children with valuable skills for building self-reliance and independence. Instead of allowing your child to throw a "pity-party" for themselves because they are feeling left-out and alone, you may need to rehearse with your child ways to ask another child to join them trick-or-treating instead of waiting to be asked by someone. Giving them the confidence they need to take the first step will be so much more empowering than just agreeing with them that the children in the class or neighborhood are mean and inconsiderate for not including them in their Halloween plans.

Who knew a simple holiday could provide us with so many wonderful opportunities to teach our children the life lessons of consideration of others, commitment to each other, problem-solving and self-reliance and independence! Here's to a happy and character-building Halloween!