

Understanding Montessori



Making Halloween Meaningful for Our Children October 11, 2009

Halloween used to be my favorite holiday. My sister's birthday is November 1, and mine is in mid-October. Mom would have a combination neighborhood open house and birthday celebration for us. We had so much fun preparing the food and decorations--handmade popcorn balls, homemade fudge, spooky punch with dry ice, string cobwebs, paper bag ghost luminaries up the walk and, of course, our costumes. We spent the better part of a month planning and preparing for our event.

As I've worked with young children, though, my enthusiasm for celebrating Halloween and other holidays was replaced with concern for respecting the needs of the children. At preschool, I saw most children in tears to see their friends and teachers in costume. By the time the morning was over, most of the children were exhausted and frightened by all the new. The children told me about being scared going door-to-door in the dark. During the weeks after Halloween, I observed a

lower level of concentration in our three-, four- and five-year-olds' activities. We witnessed more tears, temper tantrums, distractibility and clumsiness.

These difficulties were due to the "treat" aspect of trick-or-treating. The children with the biggest swings in concentration readily confessed to eating candy for breakfast and sneaking candy in their coat pockets. Visiting with our pediatrician about my Halloween observations, he told me the accident rate of his patients went up during the two weeks after Halloween. He treated more broken bones, cuts, sprained muscles, abrasions and contusions than any other two-week period in the year.

Halloween used to be my favorite holiday. I loved the excitement and anticipation of the day, going out on a cool fall evening and, of course, having so much candy to call my own. But after watching how small children react to Halloween, I've tried to extract the positive aspects of Halloween and not emphasize the costumes and candy, especially in a school environment. For children five and under, my recommendation is that Halloween should be celebrated at home only. For the young child, I recommend emphasizing the following during the Halloween season:

- 1) The beauty of the fall and the shortening of the daylight hours,
- 2) The coming of winter and the promise of spring,
- 3) On Halloween neighbors do something "sweet" for you even if they don't know or recognize you,
- 4) Even on dark nights, neighbors will open their doors and hearts to you, even if you look pretty scary to them. (And we can do the same),
- 5) For one night, you can transform yourself to be anything you can imagine,
- 6) Halloween is a time to give thanks to all those who came before us (thank you to the first person who carved a jack-o-lantern, the first person who played trick-or-treat, the first person to eat a pumpkin, etc.)

These essential lessons help me celebrate Halloween as an important tradition. We are in danger of losing important teaching opportunities as we "cocoon" in our homes with computers, big screen televisions and garage door openers as well as act more fearful of the world around us. Perhaps this passage from the book, *Graces*, by June Cotner will help us gain a new perspective on Halloween.

Amidst hobgoblins and pranksters, Lord, we seek a quiet corner this autumn evening, to give thanks for the saints whose day this really is. Be tolerant of our commercialized, costumed fun, even as you remind us of the pillars of faith upon whose shoulders we stand today. Keep our trick-or-treating fun, clean and safe, our faith memories aware, for it is too easy to lose track of what we really celebrate in the darkness of this night.

-Margaret Anne Huffman

Have a wonderful Halloween!