

Healthier HALLOWEEN

MORE TRICKS & LESS TREATS

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As a parent and naturopathic doctor, Halloween is a bit of a 'tricky' time. I live in a big city and my son attends public school. This means there is no sheltering him from the draw of HALLOWEEN CANDY! However, over the years, there has been a growing movement to think outside the box (or treat bag). The goal? Maintain a fun, healthier, celebratory, and inclusive Halloween atmosphere but with a twist. Here's why it's so important!

Sugar

The most obvious reason to shake up mainstream Halloween traditions is to cut your children's exposure to refined sugar. You are likely familiar with the effects and risks of high volume sugar consumption, but here are some highlights to set the scene. Refined sugar provides empty calories. When children overindulge, they fill up their tummies while missing out on the essential nutrients desperately needed by their rapidly growing bodies. Excess sugar intake increases the risk of obesity, which can lead to a host of chronic diseases, like diabetes. Eating refined sugar also decreases immune function, making your little ones more susceptible to colds and flus. Dietary sugar diminishes the health and diversity of our microbiome (the community of microbes living on and in our body), and we now know a healthy microbiome is a major marker of long-term health. Too much sugar also contributes to dental decay and cavities. It is even linked to behavioural issues in kids. Yikes! Research also shows that sugar has an addictive quality causing a reward and craving response in the brain (similar to other habit forming substances). This is why once we taste a small amount we want more, *more, MORE*. Let these be reminders that too much sugar is dangerous for anyone, but especially for little people.

Food allergies

Research shows that in 2015 around 7% of children under 18 years old had a diagnosed food allergy. This statistic doesn't take into account many more children affected by milder food sensitivities and intolerances, which often fly under the radar. The top allergenic foods include nuts, dairy, gluten, sesame, soy, and eggs; many of which are found in Halloween treats. It is important to raise awareness of this issue, and organizations like the *Teal Pumpkin Project* are doing just that. Teal pumpkins mark houses that have prepared non-food based giveaways, allowing kids with food allergies to participate in the Halloween fun.

When it comes to ingredients, the presence of artificial food dyes is another concern. Many children have not been formally tested for their response to these ingredients, but there is evidence showing that food colouring can cause undesirable reactions in children. Therefore, it is vital to look not only at the sugar content, but also at the full ingredient list.

The Environment

Let's also think about the attractive packaging of Halloween treats. Kids are drawn to those brightly coloured, tiny, crinkly wrappers replete with pictures of recognizable characters. This packaging results in a significant amount of waste. Open up any garbage bin after Halloween and you will see loads of those mini wrappers, disposable decorations, and more. This environmental impact is another important concern at Halloween that deserves more attention than it gets.

So, have I got you thinking? Want to make a change? Here are some shifts for you to consider this Halloween season.

Offer healthier treats

This could mean choosing savoury options (like kale chips or popcorn), or homemade alternatives that don't contain refined sugar (like homemade candy, or baked goods sweetened with honey, maple syrup, or coconut sugar). See Dr. Heidi Lescanec's recipes for some inspiration. These goodies can also be packaged in recycled paper, parchment, or reusable containers for a more eco friendly option.

Consider non-food based giveaways

Fun ideas include naturally coloured playdough, balls, stickers, or other eco-friendly goodies. These options keep things fun, fill up those treat bags, but remain inclusive to families hoping to cut their child's sugar intake, and those with kids affected by a food allergy.

Check out www.ecoparent.ca/kid-stuff/more-gifts-kids-can-make for a great natural playdough recipe. Make it together with your kids.

Throw a Halloween party

Focus on activities! Crafts, pumpkin carving, bobbing for apples or costume challenges are all fun options. This again keeps things festive, but drives the focus away from candy. There are so many amazing ways to carve a pumpkin and I'm always amazed at the creativity in my neighborhood. Be sure to save your decorations for reuse next year to soften your environmental impact.

Consider a Halloween Fairy or The Switch-Witch

How it works: my son goes trick or treating in our community with all of the other kids. At the end of the night, he picks out a few goodies to eat that night (or over the coming days). At bedtime, he then leaves his bag of treats on his bedroom doorknob for the Halloween fairy (who survives on candy). She pays a visit and trades treats for a toy before morning. This way your children can participate in the fun, but a sense of balance is maintained. And who doesn't love the added magic of a nighttime visit from a fairy? Another variation is the Switch-Witch, who flies on her broom overnight, switching the candy for a desired gift.

Not all of these options will appeal to everyone, but I do encourage parents to consider a health conscious, inclusive, and eco-friendly perspective this year. Rather than just going with the flow, keep working on creating and refining Halloween activities that fit with your family's values. You just might create a super-fun new family tradition! •



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