

Episode 9 – Halloween Tips for Kids with Selective Mutism

Hello and welcome to the Selective Mutism HELP, Home Educational Learning Program, Podcast, my name is Kelly, and I will be your host. This podcast aims to give you the help you need to support the person in your life affected by Selective Mutism. In this episode, I'll be talking about tips and strategies to help a child with Selective Mutism have a fun Halloween night. I will discuss how to support an SM child before Halloween, during Halloween, and when the night is over. Plus, I'll share tips for those children that may not be ready to go trick or treating, but still want to be a part of Halloween night. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 9 of the Selective Mutism HELP Home Educational Learning Program podcast. My name is Kelly, and I am a parent of a child with Selective Mutism. Being that I am a parent and not a medical professional, this podcast is for informational purposes only. For those of you in the United States, your kids are probably getting ready for Halloween. This is a night for them to dress up as their favorite character or as a scary monster and go Trick or Treating to get candy. For most kids, this is one of the best nights of the year! But, for a child with SM, it could be one of the scariest and not because of the ghosts and goblins. They are scared because in order for them to get candy, they have to say "Trick or Treat." Generally a family will walk around their neighborhood and ring the doorbell of neighbors who the kids know. For some children, it can be extremely difficult to talk to people for the first time if they have known them for a long time. They may be scared of how that person is going to react when they say, "Trick or Treat," so they become too scared to try.

Let's start by talking about what you can do leading up to Halloween night. First, practice what Halloween night will be like. Have them get dressed up and play Halloween. Go to different rooms in your house, have them knock or pretend to ring the doorbell. Have a parent or sibling they are comfortable with answer the door. Then they can practice saying "Trick or Treat" and getting a piece of candy. Then, go to the next room and do it again. This practice is going to train the unconscious part of their brain in getting comfortable saying Trick or Treat and their conscious brain will see that they are getting candy each time they say it! You could then set up a reward system – for every 5 times you say trick or treat to us at home while we play, you get to eat a piece of candy.

Another way to prepare could be to come up with a route ahead of time. Figure out whose house you will go to. Maybe if saying Trick or treat to the neighbors is too hard, find a neighborhood where you don't know anyone. The people in the new neighborhood would have no idea that they struggle speaking, so if they child says "trick or treat" the person won't overreact because they won't know any different. Plus, the child may never see that person again, so if they struggle saying trick or treat at that moment, it may not have a lasting effect.

Also, going with a group may be easier as well. If the SM child is comfortable talking in front of a classmate, friend, or siblings, go trick or treating as a group. They could all say "trick or treat" at the same time so that the SM child's voice isn't the only voice that is being heard. This can really help reduce the anxiety and give them more confidence. Help your child visualize walking up to a decorated house, seeing the jack-o-lanterns glowing in the dark, ringing the doorbell, watching the door open, all the kids shouting, "trick or treat," then the sound of candy

dropping into the bucket or pillowcase they are holding. All of this can train the unconscious brain so that when they are in the real situation, the brain is prepared and knows what to do. Another great part about Halloween is that everyone is dressed up. If your child is worried that someone will recognize them, let them know that it will be dark, they will have a costume on, plus there will be a lot of other kids so the people handing out the candy won't be able to tell who everyone is. The people handing out candy will be so excited to see the costumes, they may not even pay attention to who is inside the costume.

The best part about Halloween though, is the candy. I have yet to meet a child that doesn't like candy. It is a pretty great motivator and on Halloween it is easily accessible. When our daughter was 5, we talked a lot about Halloween and would ask her things like how hard would be to walk up to the house and ring the doorbell or knock, how hard would it be to put your bucket out for them to put candy in, how hard would it be to say trick or treat, how hard would it be to say thank you? By having her tell us how hard something would be, it gave us an opportunity to figure out how we could challenge her that night. She indicated going up to the door and knocking would be easy. Putting her bucket towards the person to put the candy in would be easy. But, she said it would be medium hard for her to say "trick or treat." We came up with a plan which was for every house she could say trick or treat at, she would get to eat that piece of candy. It didn't happen right away, but we kept reminding her that if she says trick or treat that she will be able to eat the candy. I think it took her until about the third house to be able to say "trick or treat." Since she did it, no matter the volume, she got to eat that piece of candy. Same with the next house and the next house. Once she got to about 5 houses in a row of saying trick or treat and getting to eat the candy each time, we switched it up to every 3rd time she says trick or treat she got to eat the candy. Eventually, she got to a point where she forgot to eat the candy as it became easy for her to say trick or treat, and she was having so much fun going to the different houses. The best part about that night, was the friend she was with was a little nervous to say trick or treat, but once she saw our daughter doing it, she was able to do it too!

Once we came home and could see how much candy she got, we could tell her how proud we were for her to use her voice. She was able to get so much candy, but more importantly, she got the confidence to use her voice in different situations. She was able to use her voice towards people she'd never met, towards people she had met before, she could use her voice in front of her friends, in front of other kids, and with or without us near her. It gave her brain an opportunity to build new pathways towards speaking and away from anxiety.

It is important during these types of holidays that parents put their own expectations aside of how they think the night should go. I remember getting so frustrated when my daughter wouldn't smile for pictures while in her costume, or not saying Trick or Treat or thank you, or refusing to go up to a house with creepy music. But once I realized how all of that was making her anxiety level increase, I was able to understand that she wasn't doing these things to purposely make me mad or that she wasn't enjoying the evening, she just needed a few things about the evening modified so that she could lower her anxiety and enjoy the night. There is a lot going on the night of Halloween with the number of kids walking around, strobe lights, creepy music, cars, people in costumes. If your child has sensory issues, be aware of that. Maybe starting when its light out so they can see clearer and the lights aren't as bright. Maybe incorporating headphones or sunglasses into their costume to help with sounds and lights.

Maybe gluing some large beads or soft material on their bucket handle that they can rub when they are feeling anxious to give them sensory input. Understanding where they are at and what their individual needs are will give them the best opportunity to have a fun night and for you to see your child having fun.

The final tip I have is for those kids who just aren't ready to go out trick or treating. They can still work on a communication challenge by handing out candy at home. Some kids find it difficult to hand things to someone, so by them handing out candy, it would give them practice with doing that. Again, since you'll have a big bowl of candy right there, you could reward them with a piece! Find out what challenge may be "medium hard" and start there. Be creative and have fun. Maybe they could be in a scary costume and sit in a chair and try to scare kids by sitting still, then changing their position to see if anyone notices. Or hit play for some scary music to start.

I would love to hear how your Halloween night goes or answer any questions you may have about getting your child ready for Halloween! You can email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com, post on the Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Facebook page, or message me on Facebook messenger. I hope you have a fun evening full of tricks and treats. Take care!