

## HALLOWEEN TREATS

Children of all ages anticipate the October evening of ghosts, goblins and bags full of candy that on any other occasion would be rationed or confiscated as sickening contraband. In a safe, supervised and hopefully charitable way, young children get to enact their dreams of strength, courage and charm. Older children relish the chance to prowl the streets together at night, enjoying their public anonymity and peer solidarity. Parents and grandparents warm to the delight of guiding or watching their young ones step out of character and into action.

Halloween is one of my favorite holidays for another reason. The reason is sadly ironic, I admit. Halloween is one of a very few times each year when I can count on meeting and greeting people who live in my neighborhood. Almost no other occasion brings together all the residents and families who live within a few blocks of each other. Weeks and months can pass without more than a passing wave or perfunctory hello between breathless commuters, parents, or children who may live next door but rarely linger outside the house or car for more than an instant.

On Halloween, however, people illuminate their homes, open their doors and welcome neighbors with disguised children onto porches or front entries. Invariably, the adults re-introduce themselves and linger to chat about the street, the year or the family. The contact among neighbors produces an invigorated sense of security about the area. Paradoxically, Halloween turns out to be the time I can drop my guard, relax my parental vigilance and experience a peaceful sense of community.

To take full advantage of this unique celebration, I suggest you consider a number of opportunities:

- Go trick or treating in your neighborhood with your children or go along with a friend who has children
- Introduce yourself to your neighbors when they greet you and ask them something pertinent to their age, health, or activities
- Talk with your child during and afterwards about the friendliness of people you met
- If you enjoyed an especially good conversation with someone, follow up with a phone call, invitation or visit some other day.
- Plan a subsequent group activity or party when lots of your neighbors could come together and continue to get to know one another
- And, still, inspect the treats before you let your children eat any.

So go out and scare up some new relationships this Halloween. That's the spirit we all need!

Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A.

Dr. Gorski, a pediatrician, is Director of Program Impact and Innovation for the Children's Board of Hillsborough County and Professor of Public Health, Pediatrics and Psychiatry at the University of South Florida.