

From *Trick or Treat* to *'Tis the Season*: Tips and Techniques for the Holidays

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HALLOWEEN

-Discuss your expectations in advance. Any rules (like one piece of candy per house, visiting just these ten neighborhood houses, the child and parent trick-or-treat together, etc.) must be made when both parent and child can calmly go over them. This is also a great opportunity to teach your child “please” and “thank you” and have the child put it into practice.

-Decide on post-Halloween candy rules beforehand. Some families have had success by planning out a one-candy-per-day rule for the week after Halloween. Other families have had success by allowing the child to exchange all the candy collected for a highly desired toy (also known as the “Great Pumpkin” exchange). If you are visiting just a few homes in your neighborhood, you may decide to give each house a pre-prepared Halloween bag to give your child including little toys and possibly a healthy treat or two. That way, you know exactly what your child will get and you avoid candy battles from the beginning.

- Plan your child’s costume and candy collection bag. Avoid costumes with lots of pockets or sweatpants with elastic at the bottom of the legs. Both offer easy opportunities for the child to smuggle away candy under the guise of “keeping their hands warm” or “tying their shoe”. Having glow-in-the-dark bracelets on both of your child’s wrists are not only good for safety, but they also increase visibility of where their hands are to prevent them from palming candy without your knowledge. Candy bags can be modified to have Velcro-secured openings (so you can hear when it is opened) or an embroidery hoop or some other hoop attached to the opening so that it becomes a wide-mouthed bag (which improves your visibility of what is going in and out of the bag).

- Teach your child what to expect. Tell them how to react to “tricks” like motion-activated spiders or people who are dressed in costume who jump out at trick-or-treaters. Let your child know that it is all part of the fun, and talk through what behavior is acceptable in response to being spooked.

- Prepare your child to transition out of trick-or-treating. Some people with PWS are reluctant to give up the opportunity to go trick-or-treating, but this transition is made easier when they are primed in advance. Deciding on a cut-off age can be useful: for my brother, it was when he entered high school. However, just because they are no longer going house-to-house doesn’t mean they have to miss out on all the fun. Now my brother gets to hand out treats... under good supervision, of course!



THANKSGIVING

- “If everyone is watching then no one is watching”. This applies to all food-centric holidays. Make sure there is an explicit understanding of who is supervising the person with PWS and when. Be sure to tag-team so that no single individual is overloaded with responsibility. If a relative is educated and aware of the challenges and techniques, include them in the tag-team chain as well.

- Plan your visits strategically. If Aunt May always has a big buffet followed by an open cookie and dessert table, you might time your visit to include just one or the other. Be sure to keep the lines of communication open with Aunt May who may be amenable to changing her food serving plan so that you and your family can stay longer. Otherwise, it might be best to invite Aunt May to a smaller Thanksgiving dinner at your own house where food security can be more easily maintained. In all cases, take advantage of your control over the environment to manage stressors.

- **Foreshadow the schedule with your child (no matter their age).** Discuss the schedule of the day in terms of order of events rather than specific times. The chaos of the holidays makes it hard to predict that dinner will happen at 6 o'clock on the dot, but easier to predict that dinner will happen after the family card game.

- **Foreshadow the food routine with your child (no matter their age).** If the dinner is a buffet, discuss in unambiguous terms how you and your child will go through the line. "Pick reasonable portions" is open to subjective interpretation and by extension, open to argument. "Pick ½ cup of mashed potatoes, one slice of meat, ½ cup serving of cooked vegetables, and one slice of pie" is precise and *not open to interpretation or subjective opinion*. If you are preparing your child's plate (which is always a good option), you will have told them well in advance that this was the plan, and you'll have reassured them of your criteria for plate design, e.g., "Don't worry, Tim, I'll be sure to include a little bit of everything offered." If this creates anxiety, it might be necessary to stipulate that Tim wait politely at the table rather than stand next to you as you make up his plate in the buffet line.

- **Have a clear plan in case behaviors take a turn** and make sure that the plan is communicated with your child. Remember that punishments are not effective in a population that has a hard time connecting cause to effect, so don't try to use "leaving early" as a punishment. It will backfire. Instead, treat "leaving early" the same way you would a fire drill: a necessary precaution. You might also include a certain amount of cool-down time in the car prior to leaving. If the person can get themselves back into thinking-mode, they may not have to leave early. If they do calm down, be sure to praise them for regaining their composure.

- **Reward good behavior.** In the same plan that outlines what to do in the case of poor behaviors, be sure to include rewards for good behavior. Good behavior includes sitting patiently at the table while the parent or guardian prepares the meal, cutting food into small pieces before eating it, and practicing turn-taking in conversations. Praise and attention are often the best rewards: they are given immediately, and thus have an immediate positive effect. Avoid major rewards like "if you follow your behavior plan at Aunt May's house, we'll go to Disneyland", which can create stress and anxiety if the child starts worrying that they might not get to go to Disneyland. Smaller rewards like "if you follow your behavior plan at Aunt May's house, we'll go to see a movie together next week" are much more manageable.

- **Take the time to take care of yourself.** No one expects a car to run on empty, and the same is true of people. Do what it takes to refuel your energy. When you are at your best, you are better able to help your child. If you notice stress taking a toll on you, find a way to do something that eases the stress. For some people, that means getting out for a 15 minute walk in the park. For others, that might mean getting together for a guy's or gal's night out.



CHRISTMAS, HANUKKAH, NEW YEAR'S EVE AND ALL OTHER HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

- **Everything listed for Thanksgiving is equally applicable here.**

- **Stockings hung by the chimney with care don't need to include candy.** Little toys and seasonal knick-knacks are great stocking stuffers that don't cause any extra anxiety. Be sure to prime expectations though!

- **For the dreidel game,** use non-edible markers like poker chips instead of chocolate coins or similar edibles.

- **For a champagne toast (or any serving of alcohol) be aware of potential drug interactions.** If in doubt, check with a pharmacist. This is easy to do when you pick up their prescriptions. The pharmacist can then take into account all of the medications and give you an informed recommendation.

- **Include food-free activities in your plans.** Arts, crafts, puzzles, and games are all great fun and encourage social interaction without triggering food anxiety.

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