

Family Meals Focus

The Ellyn Satter Institute Newsletter

The sticky topic of Halloween candy

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Your child will learn to be relaxed and matter-of-fact about sweets, the same as about other food, when you routinely include them in family meals and snacks. Children who have regular access to sweets eat them moderately. Children who are deprived of high-sugar snacks especially like them, have trouble resisting them, load up on them when they aren't even hungry,^{1,2} and weigh more.² Treat-deprived children beg, whine, and sneak to get high-sugar, high-fat foods. And feel ashamed of their eating. You may be able to keep your child from having sweets when they are small, but toward the end of grade school when they are more out on their own they will be inclined to overdo it on sweets.

A learning opportunity

Halloween candy presents a learning opportunity. Work toward having your child's being able to manage their own stash. To let them learn, keep your interference to a minimum. When they come home from the party or from trick-or-treating, let them lay out their booty, gloat over it, sort it, and eat as much of it as they want. Let them do the same the next day, and maybe even the next day if you have a particularly sweets-loving child. Then reassure them that they will still get their candy at meal- and snack-time but that for now you have to keep it for them. For dessert at meals, they may have a couple of small pieces and at snacks they may have as much candy as they want. Offer whole or 2% milk with the candy, and you have a balanced offering of protein and fat to go along with the sugar in the candy.

When they can follow the rules, your child gets to keep control of the stash. Until then, you do. Reassure them that as soon as they can manage it, they get to keep it. If you can keep your nerve with allowing the sweets at meals and snacks, your child will eventually get enough and even get to the point where they are casual about sweets.

Wise use of sugar does not affect behavior

This advice may sound alarming to you on many levels. Here is one: Despite what most people think, studies show sugar does not affect children's behavior, cognitive performance (thinking and feeling),^{3,4} or sleep.³ My own observation is that children only go on sugar highs, that is, show "deficits in behavior and cognitive performance," when they have been hungry and then filled up on sugar-only food. The sugar on an empty stomach hits them fast, abandons them just as fast, and can even be followed by sugar lows when the sugar-only energy injection wears off. Including candy along with other food at meals and with milk at snacks gives protein and fat along with the sugar, and the three together give a more-sustained release of energy. The candy itself can also prevent sugar highs. Most candy contains fat from the chocolate and the nuts, and fat slows down the emptying time of the stomach and keeps the sugar from being released all at once to the system.

Prepare for Halloween all year with sDOR

Why not prepare for Halloween all year (as well as for the many other times kids are given quantities of candy) by supporting your child's ability to eat as much as they need at the same time as you remove the "special" from sweets. Follow the Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding (sDOR): you do the *what, when, and where* of meals and snacks, and let your child do the *how much* and *whether* from what you make available. Make sugary foods a regular part of meals and snacks. Put a serving of dessert at each place at mealtime and let your child eat it before, during, or after the meal. No seconds. Then make up for the sweets scarcity you have created with the one-dessert limit at mealtime by periodically offering unlimited sweets at snack-time. Do the opposite of what seems right: The more sweets-preoccupied your child is, the more often you offer sweets. Put a plate of cookies, snack cakes, or—yes—candy on the table with milk, and let your child eat as many sweets as they want. At first, they will eat a lot, but the newness will wear off and they will get to the point where they eat a few and lose interest. In the long run, they will eat less sweets than if you do the restriction/giving-in or restriction/sneaking-around routine.

Preserve the joy of Halloween

For many if not most children, Halloween is their very favorite holiday: costumes, silliness, candy, and maybe even skulking around at night ringing doorbells! Children enjoy a lot more than just the candy, but if you make a big deal about the candy, it can spoil everything else. Ann Merritt, reviewer, experienced parent, and pediatric dietitian, observes, "This advice should be in every parent magazine every year. I have seen so many kids have Halloween ruined for them when parents are over-concerned about sugar."

References

1. Rollins BY, Loken E, Savage JS, et al. Effects of restriction on children's intake differ by child temperament, food reinforcement, and parent's chronic use of restriction. *Appetite*. Feb 2014;73:31-39.
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3. Watson EJ, Coates AM, Banks S, et al. Total dietary sugar consumption does not influence sleep or behaviour in Australian children. *Int J Food Sci Nutr*. 2018/05/19 2018;69:503-512.
4. Wolraich ML, Wilson DB, White JW. The effect of sugar on behavior or cognition in children: A meta-analysis. *J Am Med Assoc*. 1995;274:1617-1621.

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