

Opinion: Healthy ways to enjoy all that Halloween candy

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As kids gear up for Halloween, dietician Christy Brissette has some advice on healthy ways to enjoy the treats. Ariel Skelley/Getty Images

Halloween has always been my favorite holiday. As a child, I looked forward to dressing up and going trick-or-treating. I still love wearing costumes and carving pumpkins.

Nevertheless, many parents debate whether they should limit their kids' Halloween candy or let them eat their fill. With weight problems among children increasing, many parents want to limit sugar in their children's diets. Which approach best helps kids learn healthy eating habits?

I spoke to dozens of parents about how they handle Halloween candy. Like me, many are dietitians who study nutrition and eating habits.

Some Kids Aren't Allowed To Go Trick-Or-Treating

On one side of the candy debate are parents who avoid taking their kids trick-or-treating. They do other activities like swimming or bowling instead. These parents say their kids have not complained. There are also parents who use the "switch witch" or "candy fairy" approach. They take their kids trick-or-treating and let them have a couple of pieces of candy that evening. Once the kids are in bed, the parents switch the candy for a toy.

Penn State University studies show, however, that girls who are allowed to eat candy regularly eat less candy when offered. They are also slimmer. A study from the Netherlands compared the eating behaviors of children. They put them in three groups. One group was told they couldn't have sweets. Another group couldn't have fruit. The last group could eat anything. The groups who weren't allowed either fruit or candy wanted more of those foods than the group that could eat anything. The groups who were limited also ate more overall. This suggests that keeping certain foods away from people backfires. It does not teach self-control and weight management.

Some Parents Let Their Kids Eat Lots Of Treats

On the other side of the debate are parents who let their kids eat as much candy as they want. The idea is that kids might overeat the first couple of days. After a few days, though, the children forget about the candy. Some parents say this approach helps kids learn self-control.

According to studies, however, letting kids eat endless treats is linked to them being less in tune with their body's signals. They may not know when they are full.

As a dietitian, I tell parents to approach Halloween as a learning opportunity. Sweets are part of life. Sheltering kids from less healthy foods will not teach them to manage their eating habits. Here are my suggestions on how children can enjoy Halloween without eating too much.

Eating A Couple Of Pieces A Day Is OK

Dietitian and family therapist Ellyn Satter wrote the book "Child of Mine: Feeding With Love and Good Sense." Satter says it's fine for kids to have a few pieces of candy a day. They can eat them either as dessert after a meal or as a sit-down treat. For example, they can have a piece of candy with lunch.

This encourages mindful eating rather than distracted eating in front of the TV or on the run. Eating small amounts of treats should help kids learn to enjoy them more so they're satisfied. Having these treats after a meal means they will eat less candy. And, the protein and fat will help slow down the sugar rush.

Store Candy In A Cupboard

Out of sight, out of mind. Food stays in the kitchen. The candy should be hidden in a cupboard, not on the counter for all to see and grab without thinking.

Enjoy What You're Eating

Pick out the treats you love. Give away the rest. It is important to enjoy the treats we love rather than eat a lot of candy. If we eat too much we do not really take pleasure in what we're eating.

Don't Focus On Weight

It is important for adults to focus on helping kids make healthy choices. It should not be about controlling weight. Studies suggest that criticizing children's weight can increase their chances of unhealthy eating.

Think about how you want your family to approach food and treats. Everyone can learn to practice balanced food habits. I bet we would all be healthier and happier as a result.