

The One Night a Mask Can Feel Like Freedom

Why Halloween Matters for Autistic Teens and Young Adults

The Social Spectrum

Every other day of the year, autistic teenagers and adults may feel pressure to put on a kind of invisible mask.

Make eye contact.

Don't talk too much about the thing you love.

Don't stim where people can see you.

Know when it is your turn to speak.

Laugh when everyone else laughs.

Figure out what someone really meant instead of what they actually said.

Try not to look uncomfortable.

Try not to seem different.

Try to fit in.

But there is a strange and beautiful irony in Halloween for many autistic people.

Research has repeatedly connected autism with difficulty tolerating uncertainty, particularly when uncertainty and anxiety occur together. Ordinary social interaction contains an enormous amount of uncertainty.

What should I say?

How long do I talk?

Was that person joking?

Should I look at them?

When should I leave?

What do they expect me to do next?

Trick-or-treating, however, has one of the clearest social scripts imaginable.

Walk to a house.

Knock.

Someone opens the door.

“Trick or treat.”

Candy goes into the bucket.

“Thank you.”

Go to the next house.

The interaction is short. The purpose is obvious. The roles are defined.

On Halloween, the whole neighborhood makes room for costumes, favorite characters and exuberant interests. That reversal can be powerful. For some autistic teens and young adults, Halloween offers a familiar way to take part in community life and show something they love. Our job as neighbors is to make sure they are welcome through accommodation.

Headphones are okay.

Regular clothes are okay.

Not saying “trick or treat” is okay.

Leaving after three houses is okay.

Going to the same familiar neighborhood every year is okay.

Being 17, 21 or 25 is okay.

The goal should never be performing Halloween correctly.

The goal is belonging.

The difference between two kinds of masks

Autistic masking, also called camouflaging, can mean suppressing a natural response, rehearsing a conversation or changing how one appears to fit social expectations. Research links greater camouflaging with poorer mental health, although the evidence does not establish that masking causes every outcome. Autistic people describe both practical reasons for masking and its costs, including exhaustion and a sense of losing themselves. [1]

A Halloween mask can have a very different meaning. A costume can be a choice: a way to share a cherished character, invite a conversation or play with identity. It can say, “This is something I love.” No costume is required, of course. A person can also celebrate in everyday clothes, with headphones, or from the quiet of home.

Why the night can feel inviting

There is no good evidence that autistic people as a group love Halloween more than anyone else. We can, however, notice features of the holiday that may work well for some people. Trick or treating often has a short, recognizable sequence: approach a door, receive a treat, move on. That structure may make a social moment easier to anticipate. It is a plausible explanation, not a finding from a Halloween specific experiment.

Research on autistic young people's creative dress up play describes how shared characters can help them find like minded people and create a sense of agency and belonging. In a small interview study, autistic adults who take part in live action role play described autonomy, inclusion and friendship. These activities are different from Halloween, but they show how chosen roles and shared play can matter. [2, 3]

A costume can also make a deep interest visible. Research with autistic adults has linked engagement in special interests to subjective well being and satisfaction in leisure and social contact. On Halloween, the young person who knows every detail of a favorite game or film may finally have an easy opening to talk about it. [4]

The experience is not equally inviting for everyone. Crowds, sudden sounds, flashing lights and scratchy costumes can be exhausting or painful. A small study of autistic adults found that sensory environments shaped where participants went and how long they stayed. The answer is to offer choices: a quieter route, a short visit, a comfortable costume, or a celebration at home. [5]

What parents see at the door

When Louisiana mother Alicia Plumer wrote about her 21 year old autistic son, BJ, she explained that he still loved Halloween and asked neighbors to welcome him when he came trick or treating. Her story reached families far beyond her neighborhood. Another father, Paul Miller, wrote about taking his 16 year old autistic son Hunter door to door. A comment about Hunter being a tall trick or treater stung because the activity meant so much to him. These are individual family accounts, not evidence that every autistic person wants the same thing. They show how a brief encounter at a doorstep can either affirm or question someone's place in the community. [6, 7]

We should also listen to families whose autistic members do not enjoy trick or treating. The welcome we are asking for includes the freedom to participate in a different way, or to skip Halloween entirely. Inclusion means being able to choose.

There is no age limit on belonging

Community participation matters beyond one holiday. In a survey of 816 autistic adults, participation in activities people considered important was associated with more satisfying relationships and fewer unmet needs for some groups. That study cannot tell us what one night of trick or treating will do for any particular person. It does remind us that access to community life deserves to be taken seriously. [8]

Young autistic adults already experience significantly reduced opportunities for satisfying community participation compared with neurotypical individuals.

So, when an autistic teenager walks up your driveway on Halloween, this may be about much more than a miniature Snickers bar. They are participating in their neighborhood. sharing an experience with other

people, practicing independence. They may be showing you something they love and doing something they have looked forward to all year. They are part of the community and perhaps that should be enough. A teen or young adult at your door might speak softly, say nothing, avoid eye contact, wear headphones or arrive with a parent. They might be wearing a costume, or simply carrying a bag. They do not owe you an explanation, a diagnosis or a special color bucket. Greet them warmly, offer the treat if you are giving one, and let them continue on their way.

For one night, let the mask be theirs. Perhaps that is the real irony of Halloween. Autistic people are frequently expected to mask themselves for the comfort of the world around them. Suppress this, change that, try to appear more typical. And then comes one night when the entire community puts on masks. And for a few hours, unusual is normal. Intense interests are celebrated. Adults play. Teenagers become superheroes. Neighbors open their doors. And an autistic young person can walk through the same streets as everyone else, participating in the same strange and wonderful ritual.

Maybe we shouldn't be asking:

“Aren't you too old for this?”

Maybe the better question is:

“What are you dressed as?”

Then hand them the candy.

Tell them you love their costume.

Wish them a Happy Halloween.

And let them belong.

At The Social Spectrum, we believe autistic young people and their families should be able to come as they are. Halloween gives neighbors a simple chance to put that belief into practice. Notice the joy. Respect the choice. Open the door.

Research and accounts

- [1. Camouflaging and mental health, systematic review \(2023\)](#)
- [2. Creative dress up play among autistic young people \(2022\)](#)
- [3. Autistic adults and live action role play \(2024\)](#)
- [4. Special interests and subjective well being \(2018\)](#)
- [5. Sensory processing and community participation \(2022\)](#)
- [6. Alicia Plumer's family account, National Autism Association](#)
- [7. Paul Miller's first person parent account \(2016\)](#)
- [8. Community participation survey of 816 autistic adults \(2021\)](#)

Research note: Studies on masking, interests, role play, sensory environments and participation inform this article. They do not show that autistic people are inherently more drawn to Halloween, nor that every autistic person experiences it in the same way.