

Psychiatrist recommends allowing children to dress to express themselves this Halloween

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For most children, dressing up in a fun costume is one of the best parts about Halloween. Some children may even choose to dress in a costume that may not traditionally be worn for their gender. One Baylor College of Medicine expert discusses how families can handle this situation so that the child has a great Halloween experience.

There are many reasons why a child might choose a costume that is gender nonconforming, said Dr. Caroline Klemt, assistant professor in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor. It may be because they like a certain television show, admire certain qualities about a movie character, or because they have heard their friends or parents talk about favorite costumes. As teens, they begin to explore aspects of their identities, including how to dress in social situations.

Whatever the reason, the best way that parents can help their child or teen is by offering their support and helping them to feel comfortable with who they are. This can be done by warmly receiving their child's decision and practicing social coping skills that develop confidence. Such skills might include acting out role plays for tough situations like questions from peers, managing anxiety with deep breathing, and developing an age-appropriate safety plan in cases of potential bullying.

"This situation is just like any other where parents may have to prepare their kids for navigating [social situations](#), managing emotions, or developing friendships," Klemt said. "For this particular subject, one easy way to start is to ask your child what they like about their Halloween costume. Then, you can help your child practice short and sweet responses for potential questions from other children or adults. This can be followed with a question to the other person about their costume or favorite Halloween tradition. Most questions will likely come from curiosity, so there typically is not a need to develop a long-winded response regarding the child's costume choice."

Klemt added that as our culture moves toward acceptance of differences, children may feel more comfortable wearing gender nonconforming costumes because there are many more positive public role models. More examples of gender nonconformity are seen in movies and television shows.

"I think Halloween costumes are an extension of that popular culture shift," she said. "Freedom of gender expression during Halloween may help boys and girls feel more empowered by the increasing amount of choices. For example, girls may feel more excited to dress up in costumes that reflect traditionally male dominated careers."

Depending on their age, children have varying levels of knowledge regarding the concept of [biological sex](#) and gender, Klemt said. She also explained that it is important to note that there is a difference between gender expression and [gender identity](#). Gender expression is the way that we dress or express ourselves in a masculine or feminine way. However, having a transgender identity is feeling that your biological sex does not line up with the gender you feel to be in your heart and soul. Somebody who expresses themselves in a gender nonconforming way might dress in a more masculine or feminine manner than people of their same biological sex, but that does not necessarily mean that they are gay or transgender. In the same way for children on Halloween, just because a child dresses in a costume that is traditionally for the opposite gender, it does not mean anything about their sexual orientation or their [gender](#) identity.

"I know parents might get worried, especially about their child's safety, if their child wants to wear a costume that is different from what their peers are wearing. Parents naturally want to ensure that their children are not excluded or ridiculed because of the way they are expressing themselves. To those parents, I would say that it is wonderful that you want to protect your child, but it is best not to panic if your son wants to wear a princess outfit or if your daughter wants to wear a lumberjack costume. Just as many negative emotional consequences may come from telling your [child](#) that they 'should' or 'shouldn't' dress a certain way," she said.

When family members show [children](#) unconditional love and support

them by helping them to develop social skills and confidence, Klemt said it will help them feel secure and give them the opportunity to express themselves, especially on Halloween.

"Halloween is unique to any other day of the year, and above all, it is a time when people of all ages can come together and just have fun," Klemt said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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