Contributed by Kristi Jordan, OTR/L

For those who participate in fall activities and Halloween celebrations, such as choosing costumes, trick-or-treating, enjoying treats, and attending parties or events, it is important to remember to plan ahead for social, communication, and sensory issues that may occur.

“Trick-or-Treating”

Many individuals look forward to celebrating Halloween or other Autumn-themed events, a time when people can dress up as a favorite character or enjoy special treats and seasonal fun. However, Halloween can be stressful and demanding for individuals on the spectrum, if they are not prepared. Here are some strategies for a more positive experience with “trick-or-treating.”

PREPARE & PRIME VISUALLY: Use social narratives, visuals, videos, and photos to prepare for trick-or-treating. There are many options out there, so choose visuals that will prepare for the type of activity you choose. Include steps of what to do at each house. Visit the neighborhood or event ahead of time, if possible to plan for worst-case scenarios or to prepare for sensory triggers. Consider using a visual schedule for the evening events in a similar format that you use for other activities at home and at school. Include when you plan to leave the house (i.e. after dinner), where you are going to “trick-or-treat”, and what may happen during and after. Unless it would be confusing, you may choose to practice how to say “Trick-or-treat” and “Thank you.” If using a visual communication board, remember to include basic requests,
such as “I need help” or “yes” or “no” or “I need to go to the bathroom.” For examples, visit our IRCA Visual Supports Page.

BE REALISTIC & BE FLEXIBLE: Remember that Halloween is meant to be fun. If costumes are events aren’t tolerated, be willing to adapt. Have fun and take pictures of the event. Those can be used to prepare visually for next year’s trip. You likely know what is reasonable for time, number of houses, and for other issues, like waiting to eat candy. If multiple children are going, it may be a good idea to bring a few preferred activities to engage in, while riding along. You may also wish to bring a change of clothes and snacks to keep individuals comfortable while waiting for the group to finish. Remember to check labels and nutrition for candy or treats that may contain allergens or ingredients that your child does not tolerate. Here is one resource for those who are on a GF diet, updated October 2013: http://celiacdisease.about.com/od/glutenfreefoodshopping/a/GFcandies.htm.

PEER SUPPORT: If “trick-or-treating” is a new and unfamiliar social situation, consider recruiting familiar peers or siblings to go house-to-house with an individual on the autism spectrum. Explain to that peer beforehand (and their parents) that they are helping the individual know how to “trick-or-treat.”