

NAEYC for Families

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Is Dressing Up for Halloween Different than for Pretend Play?

We asked Sandra Waite-Stupiansky, PhD, professor at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and a facilitator of the NAEYC Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum, about what children get out of dressing up.

What does dressing up mean for young children?

When children dress up as part of their pretend play, they represent themselves as someone else--a mother, a monster, a dinosaur. It's an important part of their development of "transforming" one thing into another. In this case, they are transforming themselves into another role.

A toddler starts pretending the first time she picks up a set of keys and pretends to drive. Her "costume" is the set of keys, which serves as a prop for her play. The preschooler doesn't need a set of keys to pretend to be a driver. He could pick up a round plate and make it into a steering wheel. The kindergartner doesn't need any props at all; 5- and 6-year-olds can mime the actions involved in driving a car using no props.

So to connect that to dressing up, the costume is the prop that helps young children communicate the role they are enacting both to themselves and to others.

Is there a difference between dressing up as part of play (I'm a firefighter and I need a firefighter's hat) and dressing up for an event like Halloween?

Yes, there is a big difference. In pretend play, children use props and clothing to enact a role that promotes the story (scripts and scenarios) of their dramatic play. They make conscious decisions as to what will work for the roles they are enacting. They have power over the play, and they choose the costumes using their imaginations and resources. The props don't have to be overly detailed. A scarf can serve as a cape or an upside-down bowl can serve as a firefighter's helmet. The important criteria are that the child has the authority to determine what she will use and how it fits into her play.

On the other hand, Halloween costumes are often predetermined and very specific in their design, so there is little room for the imagination to take over. A firefighter costume comes with all the necessary pieces--a helmet, uniform, badge, hose, and so on. It would be better for the child's imagination to engage him or her in developing the costume, using items found around the house--or making items--to represent the firefighter's props. For example, you could cover the upside-down bowl with red duct tape and convert a cardboard paper towel roll into a hose. The process of creating the costume is just as important as wearing it.

What are some things a young child might get out of dressing up with his or her family?

Making the dressing-up ritual a family event is meaningful if the child gets to contribute some of his or her ideas to the effort. Let's say that a child loves a certain book, such as *Goodnight Moon*, and the family dresses up as the characters in the book, allowing the child to select whatever part he or she wants to take. This helps "bring the book alive" for children as they reenact the script and characters of a favorite story.

What are some things children learn about themselves when they get to choose their own costumes?

I would say that children learn some things about themselves, but more importantly, adults learn lots about the children by watching and listening closely as they engage in role play. Adults get an opportunity to peer into the window of their child's thinking and emotions. We might see them playing with the power of a superhero when they put on a cape, or nurturing a new baby when they put on adult shoes and sit in a rocking chair with a baby doll. We see parts of the children's personalities that aren't otherwise exposed.

To address what the children are learning, I would have to say that young children are not quite ready to think about what they are learning (a skill that comes a little later in elementary school), but they are learning every time they take on the perspective of someone else in their role play. They are learning what it feels like to be that superhero or nurturing parent.

What if a child really wants to wear a costume a parent doesn't approve of?

I cannot think of too many times that this might happen, but let's say a child wants to wear a costume that is immodest or includes weapons or gore that a parent does not approve of. I would approach this by being honest with the child, explaining that the costume makes me feel uncomfortable and would probably affect others the same way. Young children are usually willing to compromise with a little gentle persuasion and genuine honesty on the part of the adult. If this doesn't work, remember that you are the adult who makes the final call.

- See more at: <http://families.naeyc.org/learning-and-development/child-development/dressing-halloween-different-pretend-play#sthash.QqznTIOc.dpuf>