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Halloween Candy Okay for Kids, But in Moderation

Children anxious for Halloween may be happy to know that eating the holiday's goodies is okay as long as parents teach and model moderation.

"Balance is what makes good health, and all foods can fit," said Dr. Sandy Procter, Kansas State University Research and Extension Food Specialist. "That's sort of the motto we need to live by."

There's no reason to overly restrict candy if it can be treated with the attitude that this is one of those special times, and a little will fit in to the child's overall good health and nutrition.

Procter suggests that parents and children talk about expectations prior to trick-or-treating, such as how many houses and which neighborhoods a child can go to, or other safety considerations.

Then, when the children return home from trick-or-treating, the "treasure" can be carefully sorted; opened or unwrapped candy should be thrown away; certain pieces can be given to others; and the "favorites" can be rationed – such as one piece after meal time or after school. Using a rationing system, sometimes the candy lasts longer than the interest in it, at which point some of it can just "magically" disappear.

"It's good to instill in kids that trick-or-treating is not a candy free-for-all," Procter said. "Some of the best situations on Halloween are the organized activities held by towns, neighborhoods or organizations."

One idea for parents, she said, is to take children out for "a few stops" at nearby houses, then host a small party at home for neighborhood children and adults. Parties at a local mall, zoo, church or other attraction also help kids enjoy the holiday's fun without over-doing it on the candy.

"Focusing on the excitement of the day makes getting candy less of an issue," Procter said. "The big deal is dressing up and seeing the pumpkins and decorations on the steps."

For those who like to stay home and hand out treats, some healthier food ideas include small packs of raisins; fruit snacks; cereal bars; pretzels; etc. which should all be commercially packaged. Always reserve homemade goodies for children that you know personally. It's also a

good idea to label homemade goodies so kids and parents know where it came from when they return home and the sorting begins. For safety avoid giving "choke-ables" to children under age 3, such as jawbreakers or other hard candy, and even some small toys or trinkets.

Some non-food choices might include Halloween pencils, erasers or stickers or coupons to a local store.

"Those kinds of things can really add to the holiday, make it last longer and be something besides candy," Procter said.

For more information about foods and nutrition, contact Kathy McEwan at the K-State Research & Extension Southwind District office in Iola at 620-365-2242 or by email at kmcewan@ksu.edu.