

Holidays with Young Children, part 1

By Cindy Finch

Many families begin to consider the role of special events, celebrations, and holidays in children's lives this time of year. Here are some thoughts about Halloween, our school approach to holidays, and some ideas for creating meaning with children around holiday celebrations.

Halloween at school

It may appear that we minimize celebrations and holidays in our classrooms. However, we have talked as a staff about the insertion of Halloween into classroom activities and have determined that many aspects of this time of year enrich children's experiences at school. For example, pumpkins are prevalent in stores and gardens, reflect a real harvest going on in our community, and can be made into both food and decorations in the classroom. Instead of bringing many commercially produced things into the classroom, children begin to create masks or costume pieces and wall/window decorations as part of their day at school and as a way to play with the powerful emotions that may occur during holiday seasons. Some classes will do special things with children around this and other holidays; other classes will have regular days for children as a way to counteract the excitement outside the school walls that children are experiencing. In both cases, teacher's decisions about daily classroom experiences will reflect their understanding of the individual children and families involved in the class.

All of our decisions about what to do in the classroom around holidays are filtered through the school framework. TCS classroom experiences are planned:

- *to nurture and stimulate thinking;
- *to accommodate and support children's development; and,
- *to provide a comfortable, reliable, and predictable environment to help children clarify, order, and make sense of the world.

Halloween at home

What do you know about your child and his/her enjoyment of this Halloween season? For some children Halloween is the best holiday of the whole year. It involves pretending and dressing-up—activities young children are drawn to in daily life. It involves some playing around with scary ideas. Most young children have some fears. For some children playing with fear makes it more manageable and feels good. For others it is easy to go too far with scary images, stories, and sounds. Either response is reasonable and appropriate in young children. Many children will be uncertain about whether the scary images, sounds, and stories so prevalent this time of year are real or not, a reflection of how young children try to make sense of new or abstract information. An understanding of how your child experiences, with joy or dread, this season will help you make decisions about family celebrations.

Do you feel compelled to do what you see others do during this holiday season? I hope not. At TCS we hope families will create ways to celebrate holidays, including Halloween, that **considers the age of your children** (young children may find trick or treating fun—but may not be able to do it with more than one immediate neighbor; costumes can be elaborate or very, very, very simple) and **reflect the things you value for your children** (if you dislike the candy overeating but love the pumpkin carving, put your emphasis on what you love about the holiday and don't worry about trying to do it all).

The fall and winter holidays can be a busy time for parents of young children. It is easy to fall into the trap (I know I have at times) of thinking that we have the responsibility to provide every experience for our children this year. If you start to feel overwhelmed by holidays, your child is probably feeling that way too. The holiday season can be a joy to share with young children, especially when the emphasis is on **creating meaning** with your children about the holiday through a few simple, shared experiences and on **developing family traditions** that your children learn to associate with this time of year.