

Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

October 2011

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Iowa Task Force for Young Women



Halloween: Teachable Moment

In a recent Harris poll, Americans ranked Halloween as 3rd on a list of favorite holidays.¹ Halloween even beat out New Year's and the Fourth of July. Perhaps it is the love of a good scare and candy or the appeal of being a fanciful character even if only for a day. Whatever the case, America loves Halloween.

This celebration of the end of summer has another dubious distinction in modern times, it is a holiday with the unique quality of exemplifying how strongly our cultural stereotypes about gender are still held. Every year temporary Halloween stores pop up and right beside the ghouls and zombies lies a sea of "sexy ____" (fill in the blank) costumes for females of nearly every age. Males are subject to stereotype as well. Superheroes or anyone who wields a weapon are the preferred fare for boys.



While it would be exceedingly easy to place blame on the industry that supplies the costumes, a little collective soul-searching reveals that we as consumers have plenty to do with what is being sold. If we weren't buying these types of costumes, they wouldn't continue to be so popular year in and year out. Placing the entire responsibility on the industry does nothing to account for the many homemade costumes of the exact same style either.

This time of year lends itself to powerful discussion between you and the young women with whom you work. Do they think consumers are demanding these products? Do they think the marketing industry is so strong that it dictates to consumers what they should and shouldn't want

to purchase? What, if anything, does the selection of costumes say about our culture and our behavior expectations of females and males?

Come up with a list of questions and see where the girls lead the discussion!

Incorporate a little fun in the discussion by asking them about any Halloween traditions they've had within their family or with friends. Did they trick-or-treat every year, carve pumpkins, have bonfires, bob for apples or tell ghost stories? Do they know that orange and black are the traditional colors of Halloween because they represent fire and autumn leaves and the dark of night? How many times did they dress up as a ghost or demon? Do they know that tradition stems from a belief that Halloween is the night on which the border between our world and the spirit world is thinnest, allowing harmful spirits to pass through creating the need for a disguise in which to hide?

Provoke a little thought, have a little fun and make Halloween a teachable moment!

¹ www.huliq.com/10178/christmas-ousts-thanksgiving-and-halloween-favorite-american-holiday

Gender Responsive Program Assessment tool, site visit and technical assistance

Created by Dr. Stephanie Covington and Dr. Barbara Bloom (Center for Gender and Justice) and based on their earlier work for the National Institute of Corrections, the *Gender Responsive Program Assessment tool*® facilitates program evaluation of services to females involved in or at risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system, whether in single or mixed gender environments.

There is no cost associated with the assessment or follow-up training/technical assistance. It is part of the ongoing effort of the Iowa Task Force for Young Women to facilitate a comprehensive fundamental change in the juvenile justice system that will enhance the understanding and utilization of innovative gender-responsive approaches in all programs and services.

If you have questions or are interested in scheduling an assessment, please contact:

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