

Managing Holiday Stress: Keeping the season festive & fun

For many families, the holidays are an action-packed time of year that includes visiting, dining, gift-giving and lots of excitement. However, all the excitement can also cause stress for families and not only put a damper on holiday enjoyment, but also be bad for everyone's health. The good news is that there are many ways to manage stress to make the most of your holiday season.

Planning

The holiday season often brings with it a host of "to-do's," from decorating the house to baking, to planning visits to preparing for school events. To help keep your stress levels down, it's a good idea to try to see the big picture and plan for the things you enjoy. Before deciding what activities you'll include this year, you could make a list of all the things you liked about past holiday seasons, and what you didn't enjoy. This list may help you focus when it comes time to plan and prioritize your "to do" list for this year. Include the things you enjoy and maybe let go of those activities that no longer bring you joy.

When you get down to planning, first figure out what really needs to be done, what can wait, and what can be safely ignored. Try making some lists that create A, B and C priorities: the A list has tasks that absolutely have to be done (ex: food, shopping, cooking); B list tasks need to be done eventually (ex: cleaning, laundry); and C list tasks are those that can be left undone if needed (ex: shampoo the rug, paint the bathroom).

There are often many events and commitments that come along with the holidays, but it's important to remember that you don't have to do everything. It's fine to limit what you plan to do. If there's been a death in the family in the past year, the holidays can be especially difficult. Allow yourself a little time to feel lonely or sad, but be open to creating new traditions, too. One way to get through those tough holiday times is by spending time with others who can share your memories with you.

Keep active

After you organize your tasks, you can reduce stress by remembering to take good care of yourself. It's important to get regular exercise, particularly over the holidays. One way to do this is to get active with the kids, especially in the great outdoors. And, if you have a regular exercise routine, try not to ignore it because you're busy. Exercise will help you cope with any feelings of being too busy. It's also a good idea to try to make sure you get enough sleep and limit your alcohol and caffeine intake.

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Another good way to help manage stress is to identify what's causing it in the first place. It could be crowded malls, annoying family members or slushy winter driving. In each case, pay attention to what really bothers you, so you can more easily prepare for or avoid those stress triggers. If you can't avoid one of your trigger situations, plan some time for yourself to regain your energy afterwards, even if it's only for a few minutes.

Routines

Just as adults can feel extra stress during the holidays, so can your children. One great way to help both yourself and your children avoid overload this holiday season is to try to maintain your usual routines as much as possible. This includes making healthy meal choices, scheduling regular exercise, and getting enough sleep. Eating regularly and sleeping enough are keys to well-being for both kids and adults! If you are parenting with an ex-partner, consider setting up a schedule for visits and putting it where the kids can see it. Letting the children know what to expect can ease their tension about going between homes and activities.

For babies and toddlers, routines are even more important. Try to maintain your youngster's schedules as much as possible, including nap times, meal times, bath times and bedtimes.

For preschoolers and young children, it's a good idea to give them lots of notice before transition times, or times when activities are about to change. You might give a countdown before changing activities, and try to maintain the usual rules in your home to keep things consistent. It's also a good idea to keep the majority of rules and expectations the same during the holiday season as for the rest of the year. This helps give your child a sense of consistency and stability, and that can help prevent meltdowns.

Prevent overload

With all the sugary treats, visiting, and exciting gifts, it's easy to see how kids can get overwhelmed. You can help prevent your child from getting too revved up and overloaded by watching for some common signs and signals. Because children express their emotions and their stress-levels in different ways, it helps if you can tell when your child is becoming overwhelmed. Some common signs include irritability, withdrawal, hyperactivity, fidgeting, and clinginess. Many children can't tell you that they are feeling stressed, so it is up to you to help them manage their feelings. As a result, when your child acts out or is irritable, it is often a cue that he needs your help.

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Visiting

The holidays are often a great time for visiting with family and friends, going on shopping trips, and getting out and about. But when you're making your plans for the holiday season, it helps to keep in mind both the age of your child, the time and length of the visit, and your child's temperament.

If you have a baby, for example, you might plan in advance how long you intend to stay, keeping in mind your baby's usual routines and general temperament. If you are comfortable, you might talk to your hosts to ensure their support and assistance. It's helpful to know where the hosts would prefer you to go for diaper changing, maybe a quiet spot for a nap or a cuddle, or where to prepare or heat up any food items.

While at the gathering, many relatives and friends may want to admire the baby. For many parents, it can be difficult to say no to people who want to hold your baby. And for some babies, being passed from relative to relative is fine, but for other infants it can be very stressful. Keep a lookout for signs your infant is overwhelmed, including gazing away from people, reaching for mom or dad, fussiness and, of course, tears. It's a good idea to watch your baby's signals and give your baby some quiet time if she shows sign of discomfort or worry.

And while that special holiday outfit might be adorable, it's a good idea to consider if it is comfortable for your little one! You may want to bring a change of clothes for your baby or young child to change into later during the visit. Then once a few pictures are taken, you can get your child changed quickly and easily, and avoid any fussing. Bring along pajamas if it's an evening visit – maybe some special holiday flannels will help your child wind down.

It's possible, too, that some invitations are best declined, or perhaps alternate child care arrangements could be made so you could attend the function without your baby. Or maybe you can try scheduling visits at other times during the day that are more suitable for your baby's schedule. There are often many events and commitments that come along with the holidays, but it's important to remember that you don't have to do everything.

For children who are beyond the baby stage, there are more strategies you can use to help keep visits fun and festive for all. First, it's a good idea to bring along some snacks just in case your meal is delayed or is quite different from your usual fare. A hungry child is never a happy child! Allow your child to try new things at his own pace, and set a good example by making healthy food choices for yourself, too.

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Second, your child will need something to do while visiting. Again, consider the age and stage of your child. A toddler or preschooler may need activities or comfort objects, like a special blanket or toy. An early years child may do well to have a colouring book or a video game to play. Also think about whether there will be other children at the gathering to play with. Perhaps your child could bring a game to play, or a new book to read. If there is a lot of excitement, it might be a good idea to allow your child to take a break, or to play quietly by herself for a little while. Hugs and reassurance from parents can go a long way.

For middle years and teens, it's a great idea to give ample upcoming notice of the planned events and visits ahead of time. To help prepare your child, you could post a schedule of your planned visits and activities in advance so that your child can know what to expect. It may also help to give your child a clear picture of what the outing will entail, how you expect her to behave and who will be at the gathering. For example, you could tell your child: "We're going to Aunt Kim's for dinner and then we will open gifts. After the adults have coffee, and we all eat dessert, we'll be coming home. We probably won't be home until close to ten, so please bring along a game or a book to read, and come and see me if you get really tired." This gives a much clearer picture than "we're going to your Aunt's tomorrow for supper."

Keep in mind, too, that children of all ages may be shy. It can help to prepare your child in advance by explaining who your child will be meeting, and letting your child know that he does not have to give hugs or kisses to anyone if he doesn't want to.

If there is a dreaded visit coming up, consider planning a fun activity afterwards that will give your child something to look forward to. But try to avoid using toys or food as rewards. On the other hand, your child might be really looking forward to some visits and be excited about getting to see some family members. This can be a good 'in' to a conversation with your child –you can explore what he values or admires about that person, and what he is looking forward to during the visit.

After the visit, remember to give genuine compliments your child about his good behaviour. If you were impressed at how well he played with his cousins, for example, or how well he played quietly by himself while you talked to grandma, say so!

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Mixed emotions

Sometimes referred to as "tweens," children in their middle years from about age nine to 13 can easily get caught up in the excitement of the holidays too and, like adults, they can become overwhelmed and have difficulty managing their stress. As peer relationships become more important, middle years kids are developing more awareness of their social groups, including what their friends are up to, and this awareness can affect their expectations and add to their stress levels.

As well, middle years kids might start feeling 'too cool' for holiday traditions. Moving between childhood and adolescence, the middle years are full of mixed emotions. On the one hand, middle years children may feel jealous of their younger peers' simple delight in the season; but on the other hand they may feel like it is too childish to enjoy getting pictures with Santa or gushing over decorations. This straddling of childhood and adolescence can be frustrating and upsetting to parents, as well as to children. Mixed feelings can be confusing for middle years kids to cope with. But you can help your child work through his mixed emotions by gently exploring his feelings or 'noticing' things in a statement to help him open up. You can reassure him that it's okay to be thrilled and excited by the holidays; it doesn't make him any less mature to fully enjoy all the activities and festivities of the holiday season!

Manage the money

Finally, managing stress often includes managing money. Holiday spending can quickly get out of control. Impulse buying adds up, so it's a good idea to plan ahead. It's best to create a budget – and stick to it – to avoid huge bills in January. If you exchange gifts, you might also benefit from managing your family's gift expectations. You can also include some fun, low-cost activities for your family such as sledding, taking walks, going bowling or ice skating. Getting active and making memories are important parts of the holiday season.

If gift-giving is part of your holiday season, keep in mind that children as well as adults can get caught up and carried away in the generosity of the season. To manage gift expectations, it can be helpful to have an age-appropriate discussion about gift expectations with your child – both giving and receiving – and explain to your child why he may not necessarily receive everything he wants or why he may not receive the same or similar gifts as his friends. It's also a good idea to be aware of the messages you are sending to your child about gift-giving and budgeting. If you're frustrated with your child's focus on gifts, stop and think: have you been talking about shopping non-stop since September?

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Remember, too, that children are bombarded by advertising messages that encourage the "gimmies." Perhaps you could spend some time together thinking about what the holidays mean to your family beyond giving and receiving gifts. Consider watching family movies or television specials. Shows like "The Grinch who Stole Christmas," or "It's a Wonderful Life" tend to remind us that there is more to the holidays than just getting gifts. You could also talk about the meaning of the season to your family, and emphasize that the holiday season is not about how many gifts they receive, but rather about sharing time together with friends and family, being grateful for all of your good fortune.

Just Hanging Around

Finally, the holiday season is full of hustle and bustle, but to help manage your family's stress level, it's a good idea to allow everyone to have some downtime to just hang out and spend some unstructured time with friends and family. Try not to fill every day with too many planned activities. Sometimes being able to curl up with a book, talk with a sibling, or just play outside can be the best release for stress.

And remember to treat yourself gently. We often put more pressure on ourselves than we do on others. If you forget something this year, don't beat yourself up for it. Accept that mistakes happen, and move on. Recognize that family members make mistakes, too. If you can take these moments lightly, you will often find that these are the times that you look back on and laugh!

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