

Holiday Stress for Children and Families

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By Carol Litzler, LICSW

Ah, the holidays. No matter what holidays we celebrate, there usually are multiple demands on time, energy and resources; school activities and social gatherings, gift shopping and present wrapping, house decorating and cookie baking and on and on to the point that these joyful occasions may create undue stress for parents and children alike. Although the holidays offer the possibility of much happiness and contentment, there is also the likelihood of exhaustion, short tempers and meltdowns.

So let us take a minute to reflect on what we can do to alleviate some of the problems and help foster a more enjoyable and fulfilling holiday experience for both parents and children. In my professional work, and in reviewing the internet, regarding children and stress over the holidays, there are a number of suggestions that may be helpful.

Parent and Child Scholastic Book Clubs suggested five tips to ease holiday stress.

- (1) ***Simplify Your Priorities*** – Child psychology expert, Lawrence J. Cohen, PhD, suggests a values clarification evening, involving children and parents, to review what each of their top priorities are for the holidays. For example, being with family, lighting the Hanukkah candles, baking traditional favorites or Christmas tree decorating. He suggests that the family as a whole choose one or two of these values to focus activities.
- (2) ***Set Limits On Time Commitments*** – There can sometimes be a conflict between extended family expectations of time spent together, and the need to have some down time at home. Lizzie Post suggests (Emily Post's Etiquette, 18th Edition), that it is acceptable to let family or friends know in advance that this year your family is attempting something different by trying to spend more time at home.
- (3) ***Try to Take the Focus off Gift Giving*** – Establishing buying one gift per person for the extended family, or to buy one gift that the whole family might enjoy, like a board game. Maybe a new tradition could be established involving giving the gift of time spent together making cookies or volunteering.
- (4) ***Tame The Toy Lust*** – On a similar note, perhaps start some “stuffless” traditions at home as well. What are some favorite traditions that each person in the family enjoys? Set aside some time to do one activity honoring each person's request.
- (5) ***Diffuse The Drama***- It is likely that children become overstimulated and overtired at holiday time. Take some time out to take a walk, spend some one-on-one time with a child and remember to take a deep breath before reacting to a stressful situation.

These are only suggestions. Take from them what seems useful and let the rest fall away. Hopefully they will allow you and your children to enjoy the sense of joy and wonder that is possible at this time of year.

And wishing you all happy, healthy holidays.

Resources on line:

Parent and Child Scholastic Book Clubs; Emily Post's Etiquette, 18th Edition; Child First ,Foster Family Agency; Dr. Joshua Sparrow, Child/Adolescent psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School.

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