

How to Keep Your Family (and yourself!) Sane During the Holidays
By David Lowenstein, Ph.D.

The holidays are one of the most special times of the year for both children and adults. Most parents strive to make this a magical occasion for their children - a time when everything goes well, when everyone gets what he or she wants and the entire family basks in the glow of the true meaning of the season.....

Ha! Maybe in a fantasy world. The reality is that in trying to create the perfect holiday, the season can easily lead to high stress, flared tempers, family arguments, unrealistic expectations and disappointment.

If you're feeling overwhelmed like most people, check the expectations you have for yourself and try to scale down a bit to a more manageable holiday this year. This is a joyous and special time and we should be focused on love and good will, not frantic with the pressure of having to get everything done.

Here are a few ideas that will make this stressful time easier for everyone:

- First of all, it may be hard to do, but try to relax. Your children take cues from you and if you are exhibiting stress and anxiety, chances are they will begin to show signs of stress too - misbehavior, fighting with siblings, etc.
- Everyone's expectations of the holidays are different. Have a family meeting and discuss which traditions each person feels is most important. Do away with the others and then don't feel guilty about it! You can reevaluate next year if anyone feels they missed a certain aspect of celebration.
- Pick your battles with your kids as they will likely be acting up. Stand firm on the important stuff (manners, sharing) and let the rest slide. If your daughter wants to wear bells on her toes, let her!
- Don't make your children perform for guests or force them to talk to relatives if they don't want to. This can be especially stressful for a child who is shy. Allow him to get used to the idea of so many people in his home and let him warm up at his own pace.
- If you are planning to have a lot of children at your house during get-togethers, make sure you talk about the situation with your child before hand and remind him that the other kids may want to play with his toys. If it's after the gift opening has occurred, it may be necessary to put some of the new toys away and only bring out the ones your child is willing to share.

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- For older kids who often are less interested in traditional holiday obligations, be clear about when you require their presence - trimming the tree or lighting the Menorah, for example - and be flexible on the others. It will save you lots of headaches and you may even get a pleasant surprise when they show up for the non-required activities!
- Schedule quiet time for each child. Usually kids act up because they are overtired. Make sure they get some breaks from the noise and confusion.
- Spend time with each child alone. Sometimes kids can feel ignored during the hustle and bustle of family visits, preparing for holiday meals, shopping and religious ceremonies.
- Attempt to keep things as normal as possible when visiting relatives. Try to keep the same bedtime, don't skip naps and try to avoid too much junk food.
- Set expectations for gift giving. Have your kids make out lists before hand and discuss their wishes. If your son wants a new computer and there is no way he is getting one, negotiate a second choice.
- Plan for the let-down. Arrange some fun to avoid the blues once the last gift is ripped open and the relatives leave. Have pizza night or go to a movie.
- If possible, try to minimize running around to different relatives' homes. It's stressful for you and especially stressful for your children. If you can't get everyone to a central location, remember that you can't please everyone and there's always next year.
- If you feel constantly "outdone" by relatives in the gift-giving department, institute a gift limit for each child. This may reduce stress you feel in overspending.

There's no way to completely avoid the stress of the holidays. You want it to be a special time that creates memories for your family. The key is to remember that your time together will be cherished in years to come more than any meal, tradition or gift.

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