

## **Coping with Holiday Stress**

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For most children, the holidays are happy, fun and exciting times. There is a break from school and a chance to see friends and relatives. There may also be special food, activities, rituals, trips and anticipations that create excitement. Even these joyous moments bring stress. Disruptions in routine, overstimulation and excitement can lead to being overtired which we all know can lead to being cranky, oppositional or overly emotional. If not managed, the hustle and bustle of the season can be a source of stress in any family.

Holidays bring about an additional source of vulnerability for children who are in families complicated by divorce, separation, remarriage, parents away on military service, or recent losses. Holiday traditions can cause children to remember times that were different and remind them of what has changed. A child may recall and long for a time when mom and dad were together as an intact family, or may feel angry that their parent is away on military duty while their friends' families are all together. These are normal reactions and the emotional response can be quite varied between children.

Regardless of the stress that a child experiences at this time of year, or the circumstances that prompted the stress, there are ways to help children cope. Most important, is for the child to have someone who will listen carefully to their concerns. Effective listening includes being able to put words to the feelings that you think might be behind your child's actions. Encourage your child to express his/her feelings, but remember, you may need to approach your child after the period of emotional charge to do this.

Following are some guidelines for parents to help children cope with holiday stress:

1. Discuss holiday plans in advance. Make predictions of what will happen and in what sequence. If your child is young, make a visual reminder on a calendar. If possible, include your child in the planning process. Children function better when there is a sense of predictability. Impromptu rushing, changing of plans and uncertainty can all increase stress.
2. Don't promise things you have no control over. If you're separated from your child's parent, don't promise what he or she will do. If the child has an extravagant request from Santa, pave the way so he or she can see how it might be unrealistic.
3. Your time and attention is the best gift you can give. Overcompensating for another parent or a significant loss by showering lots of gifts upon a child, will not work.
4. Make sure your child gets plenty of rest. Sticking to a predictable bedtime routine increases the child's ability to be resilient and bounce back from increased

excitement. While it is tempting to let the child stay up because it is exciting or may disrupt your own festivities, lack of sleep can certainly lead to increased irritability.

5. Maintain family traditions even if a parent is absent. Children thrive on certain traditions. Even if some things have changed, maintaining the rituals will also let the child know that other things have remained the same.
6. Laughter is a great stress beater. It's a simple way to change everyone's mood from bad to good. Take time to read the comics to your child, or find a holiday joke book with family humor at your library.
7. Most importantly, as the adult caregiver, take care of yourself. Following through on the above recommendations, may require a great deal of fortitude to get beyond your own stress. So, the trick is to pace yourself, don't get overloaded with obligations, get rest, and limit the food and alcohol indulgences. If you feel stressed, it increases the pressure and tension on your child.

Most children, even those dealing with loss or family transitions, can and do enjoy the holidays. The holiday season doesn't have to be a time of stress and exhaustion. Make sure you do your part to make the most wonderful time of the year live up to its reputation. Pace yourself, limit yourself, acknowledge your feelings, and this patience and honesty will help prevent conflict and reduce stress so that you and your family can enjoy the holiday season.