



Tips for Handling Holiday Stress with Children

The holiday season is meant to be a time of joy and celebration, but for children, it can also be overwhelming. Between changes in routine, increased family gatherings, and the excitement (and stress) of holiday preparations, it's easy for children to become overstimulated or anxious. As parents and caregivers, it's important to be mindful of their emotional needs and offer support in ways that help them navigate the season with ease. Here are some tips for helping your child cope with holiday stress:

1. Maintain a Consistent Routine

While the holidays often bring a shift in our regular schedule, children thrive on routine and familiarity. Sudden changes in their environment—whether it's a new babysitter, extra family visits, or late nights—can leave children feeling disoriented and anxious. If possible, try to maintain familiar routines in your child's day, such as regular meal times, naps, and bedtime. If your child is acting out or becoming irritable, it may be a sign they are overwhelmed by all the changes. Be compassionate with yourself—it's okay not to do everything. If you don't get to all the holiday traditions like cookie decorating or seeing every holiday light display, that's okay. What matters most to your child's emotional well-being is the quality time you spend together.

2. Avoid Linking Behavior to Rewards

Many holiday traditions, such as the *Elf on the Shelf* or the idea of Santa Claus "watching" children to determine if they deserve gifts, can unintentionally put stress on children. The pressure of being "good" for presents or behaving a certain way for rewards can create anxiety, making children feel like their worth is tied to their actions. Instead, we encourage modeling kindness, generosity, and gratitude. If you choose to celebrate Santa, remember that he represents the spirit of giving and the joy of sharing with others, rather than serving as a tool for behavior modification.

3. Prepare Children for Changes and New Experiences

Children tend to cope better with transitions and changes in routine when they are prepared ahead of time. Whether it's a change in the daily schedule, a new family member visiting, or a holiday outing, talking through the plans in advance can help your child feel more in control. For example, you can say, *“Tomorrow, we’re going to visit Aunt Jane’s house. There will be lots of people, and it might be a little noisy, but I will be with you the whole time. If you feel overwhelmed, it’s okay to take a break with me in a quiet spot.”*

Giving children a heads-up allows them to mentally prepare for what's ahead and feel more secure.

4. Create Calm Spaces and Manage Overstimulation

During the holidays, children are often surrounded by new sights, sounds, and sensory experiences, which can lead to overstimulation. Set aside a quiet space in your home where your child can retreat when they need a break. This can be a designated “calming corner” with soft pillows, books, or sensory toys where your child can take time to themselves if they are feeling overwhelmed. Limit the amount of time spent in highly stimulating environments, and make sure your child has opportunities for rest and quiet time throughout the day.

5. Be Flexible and Present

The holidays are about connection, joy, and togetherness—not perfection. While it's easy to get caught up in the idea of “holiday magic” and the pressure to create memorable moments, remember that your child's sense of security and love is what matters most. Be flexible with your expectations, and try to stay present with your child rather than focusing on what hasn't been done. Sometimes, simply being with your child in a calm, supportive way is the best gift you can give them.

6. Practice Mindfulness and Stress-Relief Techniques

If you feel yourself getting stressed or overwhelmed by holiday preparations, take a deep breath and try to stay grounded. You can model calming techniques for your child, such as deep breathing, stretching, or using a calming object like a stress ball or a soft blanket. Sometimes, just a few minutes of mindful breathing together can help reset the energy in the room and keep the focus on enjoying the moment.

7. Keep Expectations Realistic

As we know, the holidays can bring a mix of emotions—joy, excitement, frustration, and even sadness. It's important to keep expectations realistic and not to expect perfection from ourselves, our children, or our families. Holidays don't have to look a certain way or follow a prescribed script. What matters most is the quality of time spent together and the relationships we nurture during this season.

In Conclusion

The holidays can be a magical time, but they can also be a time of heightened stress for children and families. By keeping a few key principles in mind—consistency, preparation, flexibility, and emotional awareness—you can help your child feel more secure and less overwhelmed. The best gift you can give this season is your presence and understanding. So, take a breath, enjoy the moments, and remember that the holiday season is about being together, not perfecting every detail.