

# DISCOVERING *Your Best Self*

YOUR WEEKLY COMMUNICATION

## How to Reduce Kids' Holiday Stress

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While the holidays and festivals celebrated between late November and early January are traditionally thought of as times of family togetherness, gift giving, and general merriment, they also can be a tough time for children.

As a parent, you can take steps to make the holidays less stressful for your children – and yourself.

"The first thing for parents to do is to talk between themselves about any expectations or plans for the holiday before they talk to their kids about it," says Kenneth Gorfinkle, Ph.D., assistant clinical professor of psychology at Columbia University in New York. "They really need to think about what Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa means to them, from cultural, religious, and family points of view."

Among the questions parents can ask each other:

- *What does the holiday really mean to us?*
- *What kinds of memories do we want to create for our children?*
- *What past memories would we like to recreate (or avoid) for our children?*

Once these questions are answered, ideas can be presented to the children. Instead of making an autocratic decision, parents should be ready to respond to their children's suggestions and anxieties through negotiation, especially if the children are older. "The wishes and feelings of children need to be respected," says Dr. Gorfinkle. "It can make a huge difference in how kids feel. They'll play along much better, even if they don't get their way."

Once a decision has been made on how to mark the holiday – a trip somewhere, a festive family dinner, a spiritual or religious activity, or a cultural event – parents can set realistic parameters for their children. This in turn creates a correspondence between the child's expectations and what really happens, which can minimize the possibility of disappointment.

One significant step a family can take is to involve children in holiday preparations. Rather than being passive participants, they will feel invested in the plans. For example, show them how to bake cookies and prepare for the dinner. Ask them to help pick out and wrap a gift for another family member. If you're going on a trip, give them maps and have them learn about where they are going. This kind of involvement can help ease the anxieties that are brought about by changes in routine.

Of course, gift giving is for many a central holiday feature. Again, to ensure that children's expectations are reasonable, it is a good idea to discuss ahead of time what is realistic.

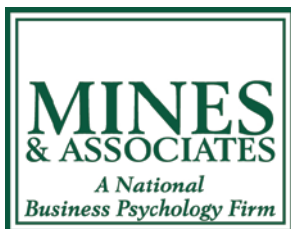
For example, children can be asked if they want eight little Hanukkah presents, or one or two big ones. Parents can also ask their children if they prefer receiving all their gifts at one time rather than spread out over several days. In addition, it's OK to discuss with children (in terms they will understand) what kind of budget is available for buying presents.

Parents should communicate to people outside the immediate family what guidelines exist for giving presents to their children.

"Parents have an obligation to lay out what is and is not OK. Friends and family have no idea about any limits you impose unless you tell them," warns Dr. Gorfinkle. "Fortunately, they usually appreciate being told about such guidelines. It also helps to let others know what your children's interests are."

Once the holiday arrives, it is important to be mentally prepared for last-minute changes. Inclement weather, sudden illness, and unpredictable human behavior (the last can be triggered by the emotional swirl of the holidays) can ruin the best-laid plans.

Cautions Dr. Gorfinkle: "Expecting the holidays to be exactly as pictured opens a person to automatic disappointment. Staying flexible means smoother transitions to changes." In the end, the holidays will be memorable for more than the things that went wrong.



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