



Handling the Holidays – A guide for parents



For many of us, the holidays are an intense time. For children, this is especially true. The following list of time-tested tips can help you guide your child through the holiday season.

Maintain familiar routines

Children create internal order in their minds through the external order around them. By adhering as closely as possible to established routines, you can help your child to weather the irregular schedules and new stimuli of the holiday season. Give special consideration to bedtimes, waking-up times, meal scheduling and naptimes.

Prepare for success

Before a holiday outing, family dinner, or other new situation, consider your child's needs carefully to avoid unexpected surprises. Will there be food he can eat, or should you bring food for him? Will he need a nap, and is there a place to nap? Will there be games he can play with, or will you need to bring a bag of his favorite toys and books? Some simple preparations will increase your child's comfort in new situations, including contacting the host/hostess and finding out what their expectations of your child will be.

- *"There won't be many toys or books at Aunt Sally's house. You can fill your backpack with your favorite games and books so you'll have lots of fun things to do. She has a big, bright living room, and you can play with your toys there."*

Set your child's expectations

Children benefit from knowing in advance what is expected of them, and even young toddlers can understand a very brief description of an upcoming social occasion. When setting your child's expectations, describe who, what, when, where and why. You can also follow up with questions for your child to help them further understand what will be expected of them.

- *"Tonight we'll be having dinner at Grandma Judy's house. It will take us a long time to drive there, so let's choose some books for the car ride. You'll get to see your cousins Alice and Mark, and your Aunt Amy and Uncle Matt. There aren't many toys at Grandma's house, so we'll choose some of yours to take with us. You can also play with Alice and Mark"*
- *"Do you remember Grandma Judy? She's so excited to see you tonight. What games will you play with Alice and Mark?"*
- *"When we're sitting at the table having dinner, that's a good time for you to eat quietly with us and use your best table manners. If you need anything, you can ask me quietly – I'll be right next to you".*
- *"When Grandpa and Grandma arrive, they'll each want to give you a big warm hug. After that, you can ask them if you can take their coat and hang it in the closet for them, like I showed you. They'll like that very much".*
- *"You'll be receiving some presents tonight. It's very exciting, isn't it? It's also important to say "Thank you very much" to every person who gives you a present. Let's practice. You give me a present. Thank you very much, Micah! Now, I'll give you a present. What can you say back to me?"*

Set a good example

Even the most patient parent can experience frayed nerves during the hectic holiday season. However, it's also important to remember that children take their cues from the adults around them. Children will also follow your example with regard to food intake, greetings, pleases and thank yous, and other social aspects. By remaining a calm demeanor, and modeling how you'd like your child to behave, you set clear expectations for their behavior. For more formal social situations, consider role-playing with your child so that she knows what her expected behavior should be. This will also lessen your child's tension due to unfamiliar settings and people.

- *"I'm just going to have one scoop of mashed potatoes. I want to have room for dessert!"*
- *"Today's going to be a really busy day. I'll make sure I have some quiet moments so that I can feel relaxed. Would you like to come sit quietly with me?"*

Involve your child

Children love to be a part of the holiday bustle, and by including them you can create special memories as well as keeping them productively occupied. Consider your child's ability level when assigning tasks, and explain exactly what you want them to do. This can include modeling slowly and clearly the exact movements they will use to successfully complete tasks.

- *"I'm so glad you want to set the table! I know you'll make it look beautiful. First you have to carry each plate to the table, one at a time, and put it in front of each chair. I'll show you how. I'm going to walk slowly, and use two hands to hold each plate".*
- *"Now it's time for the forks. The forks go on this side of the plate. You can use your thumb, like this, to see where to put the fork. You can put one fork next to every plate, just like this. You do the next one, then I'll take another turn".*
- *"When we wrap presents, we have to make sure we cut the right amount of paper. I'll show you how, and then you can measure. Then you measure again, and then you cut along the line. It's called 'measure twice, cut once'"*

Balance healthy eating with occasional indulgence

Holiday feasts are frequently filled with sugary, calorie-dense dishes, and children's bodies are especially sensitive to these foods. Help children learn how to limit their consumption by offering appropriate choices, setting boundaries, and limiting access to overly-tempting foods.

- *"Would you like a slice of apple pie, or a cookie?"*
- *"During the holidays, it's fun to eat some special foods, as well as the healthy foods we usually eat".*
- *"It's sometimes hard to say no to yummy food, so I'm putting this back in the pantry so we can make good choices. I'll bring them back down later when our guests arrive, and we can have a few each so everyone can enjoy them".*

Select holiday activities carefully

When deciding which holiday invitations to accept or activities to do, as much as possible consider how your child will react in those circumstances. This ranges from shopping trips to the mall, to holiday parties, to large family gatherings. Balance what you know of your child's personality and habits with the adult duties required of you during the holiday season.

Remain focused on deeper meaning

With the commercialization of the holiday season, parents are more concerned than ever about offering their child a balanced experience, with both the fun of gift-giving and the meaning of the season.

Limit presents Give one special gift instead of a large selection from a list. This helps children learn to feel satisfied with quality, and not quantity.

Give presents a context Discuss gift-giving with your child in simple terms. This is one way that people show they are thinking of us. Handmade or simple presents are given with as much care and love as a large, expensive present.

Create a donation ritual You can engender in your child an appreciation for their own circumstances, and a desire to help others, by creating a simple donation ritual every year. Select a charity or organization to which you would like to donate, and involve your child in selection and distribution of your donation.

- *"Giving presents is one way to show people that we care about them. What are some other ways? I'll think of one. You can give a big, warm hug. Can you think of some ways we can show people we love them?"*
- *"We're lucky that we have so many nice things. We have yummy food, a warm bed, and lots of toys. There are lots of children who don't have those things. Let's think of some things we could do for them so that they have a nice Christmas, too".*
- *"One of the nicest things we can do when someone gives us a present is to write a thank you card. Let's write some thank you together. You can tell me what to write, and then you can sign your name at the bottom." (if child is not yet a writer)*

Further Reading

Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy back into the Season

by Jo Robinson and Jean Staeheli, Harper Paperbacks, 1991

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