



Helping Children Cope With Holiday Stress: Tips for Parents

For most children the holidays are happy, fun and exciting. There's a break from school, and a chance to see friends and relatives. There may be special food, music and family traditions. However, for some children, the holidays can be stressful and confusing. Family plans and celebrations may be complicated by divorce, separation or remarriage. The holidays can be a difficult time for children who have lost a parent, sibling or close relative.

The holidays often remind children of what has changed in their lives. For example, a child from a divorced family may feel sad on some level because he misses the "intact" family he used to have. A child whose parent is on active military duty may feel it's unfair that her father or mother needs to be away over the holidays.

The following are some tips for parents to help children cope with holiday stress.

1. Discuss holiday plans in advance, and let kids participate in decisions. Kids need some degree of predictability. Prolonged uncertainty, constantly changing plans or last-minute decisions can all increase stress.
2. If you're traveling, leave plenty of extra time and bring snacks, books, games and/or music.
3. Don't over schedule. You may not be able to do everything or see everyone. Kids can easily get "burned out," overtired and cranky during the holidays.
4. Give kids some "down time." Don't expect them to be "on" all the time. Leave room for some quiet activities, like listening to music, taking a walk or reading a book.
5. Make sure kids get plenty of sleep. While it may be exciting to stay up late, lack of sleep often leads to increased irritability.
6. Let kids be honest about their feelings. Don't force them to act happy and excited if they're feeling quiet or down.
7. Don't promise things you can't produce. For example, don't promise a parent will be home in time for the holidays if the decision is really out of your control. Don't promise someone will call if they're in an area with limited phone service.
8. Uphold and maintain family traditions even if a parent is absent. Kids count on certain traditions. They can have an important grounding effect by letting kids know that even though some things have changed, other things have remained the same.
9. Don't try to compensate for an absent parent with extra gifts or toys. What most kids really want is your time, attention and reassurance.
10. Take care of yourself. Try to avoid being overloaded with obligations. If you feel stressed, it increases the pressure and tension on your children.

Most kids, even those dealing with loss or family transitions, can and do enjoy the holidays. However, preparation, patience and honesty can help prevent conflict, reduce stress and enhance the holiday season for the whole family.

Source: American Psychiatric Association