

## Creating Holidays That Work for the Family

by Robbie Wright

Parents want the holidays to be perfectly wonderful for their children. But sometimes during this exciting occasion children, particularly the young ones, are far from joyous. If anything, they are often filled with tension, emotional meltdowns and tears.

With awareness and flexibility, parents can work to insure the holidays will be enjoyable and fun, not only for their children, but for themselves as well. The following are some potentially stressful areas and suggestions on how to resolve them:

- Routines are important, especially to infants and young children. They like their schedules for eating and sleeping to remain the same, and can be very inflexible if there are many changes in their environment. This can make traveling and staying in new places especially difficult. Parents need to both be aware and adaptable to their child's needs, as well as aware of the consequences if these schedules are stretched. By attempting to keep the routines as normal as possible, outbursts are less likely to happen. Make sure that nap and bedtime routines are the same. If staying at a relative's home, always have a quiet time to read favorite books, sing usual bedtime songs, and include favorite bedtime snugglies and toys.

Although it can be difficult, meals and diet also need to remain as regular as possible for children. Avoid excess sweets and lots of snack food.

- Because families are frequently scattered all over the country, the holidays may be the one time of the year when everyone gets together. For many young children, these infrequent visits may mean they are meeting people for the first time or from too long ago to remember.

It is very important to keep in mind that infants and toddlers go through stages of separation anxiety and can become upset around any stranger, relative or not. Recognizing that stranger anxiety is a normal part of development, parents need to reassure their child by picking him up, holding him and letting him feel secure.

- Your child has already been stressed by all the changes in the routines caused by this special occasion. The new faces, extra activities, heightened noise, lights, music, gifts and

treats only add to more tension. Before long, there can be a howl rising from your child or an emotional meltdown.

The best way for parents to prevent overstimulation is to be aware of their child's limits and to step in before she loses control. For example, parents should allow their child to meet one person at a time, and not let her be passed from person to person like a football. When their child appears to be getting upset, parents can take her out of the festive scene for a quiet walk or just a cuddle. Parents can also limit the number of activities and events each day and be sure to alternate them with less stimulating times. Establishing a room, such as a bedroom, to retreat to with their child, parents can provide some restful time to ease overstimulation.

- Perhaps nothing can be more frustrating than for parents to have grand hopes of a perfect holiday as a family, only to find it filled with tension and disappointment instead. Sometimes this happens when parents try to give their child the kind of holiday they wish they had had in their childhood. Then when the child doesn't react to the gifts and activities the way the parents had expected (or even worse, seems grumpy and unhappy), there can be disapproval, letdown and anger at the child. To get through the holidays smoothly, parents need to lower their expectations in a variety of areas.

Also remember not to expect perfect behavior. There will be times when a child will reach his limits and become loud and unruly.

- Parents also need to keep holiday preparations at a manageable level. One way to cut back is to list 10 things they feel they should do during the holidays and then cross out five.

Instead of getting wrapped up in the glitter and excessive busyness, parents need to take time to feel the magic. It is there, waiting for them and their child.

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