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Holiday Stress Affects Children Too

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As we approach the holidays, many of us look forward to spending time with family and friends and sharing in the joys of the season. However, for some, the holiday season brings up negative feelings. At this time of year, more than any other, we think about loved ones we have lost, how to finance the gifts and experiences we want to give our family, how to “make the rounds” to all the places people expect us to be, how to survive hours in the car with small children, and the list goes on.

A poll conducted by the *American Psychological Association* (APA) concluded that 8 out of 10 Americans anticipate stress and anxiousness during the holiday season. The APA’s 2011 and 2012’s *Stress in America* surveys found that up to 75% of Americans reported money as their most significant source of stress. The APA also found that women are more likely than men to report heightened stress levels during the holiday season and less likely to take time to relax or manage their stress in healthy ways. In all surveys, causes of stress included:

- Expenses related to the holiday season.
- Hassles of traveling long distances in short periods of time.
- Too many obligations.
- Overeating.
- Grief triggered by the recent passing of family members or loved ones who passed away during the holidays.
- Short days and lack of sunshine triggered seasonal affective disorder (SAD).
- Children’s wishes that cannot be fulfilled.



Holiday stress affects children just as much as adults.

Children learn what they see. If they see the adults in their lives stressed out, they will be too. During the holiday season, children may begin exhibiting behaviors that indicate stress:



- Tears for a minor reason or for no reason at all.
- Nervous behaviors – nail biting and hair twirling.
- Physical complaints – headaches and stomach aches.
- Regression to younger behaviors – bedwetting, temper tantrums.
- Withdrawal from school, friends, and family.
- An obvious change in regular behavior.

The following tips may help parents relieve holiday anxiety and feel less stress.



Set expectations – Be honest, realistic, and forthright about the expectations for gifts and holiday activities, especially when money is an issue. Use this as an opportunity to teach your children about the value of money and responsible spending.



Teach the importance of family and family traditions – Family traditions offer great comfort and security for children. What are your family traditions? Perhaps your family would enjoy creating a holiday calendar or baking cookies together. Help children view the holidays as valuable time to reconnect with family and friends.



Teach the value of giving – Volunteer with your children at a local charity (if age-appropriate). Give to a child in need through an Angel Tree, Salvation Army Toy Drive, etc. Assisting someone



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in need teaches children about the value of helping others. No matter how small the gift or deed, giving to others teaches compassion. *It is better to give than to receive.*



Take care of yourself and your family – Engage in activities your family finds relaxing and enjoyable. Don't overextend obligations to attend holiday affairs. Say no. You don't have to accept every invitation you receive. Cut back on time spent watching TV and get the family out for a winter walk, ice skating, touch football, etc. Physical activity takes children away from sedentary time and the possible influences from advertisers to wish and ask for unaffordable gifts.



Age-appropriate ways to alleviate stress in children:

Infants and toddlers – Upsetting children's routines and predictability are the main contributors to holiday stress. Schedule activities around naptimes and mealtimes. Keep bedtime routines as close to normal as possible. Watch for signs that your child is stressed and overly tired – fussiness, ear pulling, and clinging behaviors. Take your child's favorite blanket or stuffed animal when you run errands or travel. A bit of home can reduce your child's holiday anxiety.



Preschoolers – These little ones are old enough to experience the excitement and anticipation of holiday celebrations. However, they can easily become over stimulated. This leads to tears of frustration and a possible regression to younger behaviors. Keep plenty of healthy snacks available when you're out shopping or visiting to ward off hunger-related tantrums. Be patient during these stressful times. Remember when the holidays are over, things will improve.



Older children – Extra-curricular activities during the holiday season add a great deal of stress. Be on the lookout for signs your child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed – stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, and/or nervous behaviors such as nail biting. Do your best to see that your child gets plenty of rest and is eating regularly. Have them tell you how they feel and what you can do to help them be more calm and relaxed.



Laugh – Laughter relieves stress and changes everyone's mood from bad to good. Lighten the mood with funny movies, sledding, or cozy chats over cups of hot chocolate. Don't forget the marshmallows!



Find ways to cope with your own holiday anxiety. The less holiday stress you feel, the more relaxed your children will be. Plan ahead and remain flexible. Don't overbook your time or take on responsibilities you have no desire to fulfill. Sit quietly and think about what the holidays really mean to you, then make your decisions based on your true values.

Resources:

- <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/parents-holiday.aspx>
- <https://www.aahealth.org/programs/behav-hlth/adolescent/child-holiday-stress>
- <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/public-awareness/holiday-stress>
- http://www.pal.ua.edu/stress/holiday_children.php

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