

Polk/Burnett Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Newsletter



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Managing the Holidays

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- *Stress-reducing techniques for holiday celebrations*

Resources:

Holidays with
Extended Family,
A. Griswold

www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/grandparents/index.html

Grandparents
Can Provide
Memorable,
Meaningful
Holiday Gifts

www.uwex.edu/sites/flp/grgp/memorableholiday.pdf



The season of jingle bells and roasting chestnuts create many challenges for families. Holidays are stressful—limits on time, energy, and money present obstacles for parents as they attempt to make holiday celebrations memorable.

Families in transition, including multi-generational, step, divorced, separated or widowed, may find navigating holiday celebrations particularly difficult. When family composition has been altered, the pressures associated with the holidays are enormous. Family cracks become more obvious at a time when family togetherness is emphasized. Extended family relationships may experience strain as members spend more time together. Possible issues include: becoming comfortable with new family members, determining who gets gifts (and who doesn't), budgeting how much should be spent, hammering out visitation and transportation schedules for children, deciding where celebrations will be held, and negotiating what foods will be served.

Children who have experienced changes in family composition may be especially vulnerable during the holiday period. They may experience divided loyalties and guilt as rarely seen family members try to re-establish ties and relationships. Routines are frequently forgotten and children experience inconsistencies in bedtimes, meals, supervision, and daily structure. Competitive gift giving often occurs as adults attempt to “make up” for past circumstances. Children may be confused by complicated family structures as they

attempt to keep straight multiple sets of step-parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The same holiday can be celebrated several times, with different family groups, all of whom have unique traditions and customs. Children may not be aware that what is permissible, or even encouraged with one family group, is inappropriate with another set of relatives. Behavior often deteriorates as children become tired, hungry, over-stimulated and confused.

Holiday stress is a reality, but it needs to be managed. Developing a realistic view is an essential first step. Some stress-reducing strategies for families include:

Communicate Effectively. Family members can't read each others' minds. Clearly communicated expectations reduce opportunities for misunderstanding and disappointment. Make plans and set schedules well before the actual date. Individuals are less likely to feel “left out” or excluded if they know that efforts have been made to include them early on.

Maintain Consistent Routines. Children who have experienced family stress are especially sensitive to changes in their routine. Consistency provides them with a sense of balance. Adhering to regular meal times, nap and bed times, and established family rules will make the holidays less confusing and overwhelming to children.

Plan Gift-Giving. Gift giving will be more effective if adults think through potential purchases based on their budget,

Relinquish Responsibility for Others' Happiness.

Sometimes, even the most careful planning, attention to details and sensitivity to others' feelings doesn't result in a picture perfect holiday celebration.

Knowing that time is sometimes the best healer, and recognizing that no one can make anyone else happy is essential. Creating a new family history is a gradual process that demands patience, optimism, and love.



Reviewed by Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Program Specialist in Aging.

their time, and how many gifts are really appropriate. In multigenerational families, gifts are sometimes used as opportunities to secure children's loyalties. Excessive gifts may also result from adults' feelings of sympathy or guilt. Extreme gift giving benefits no one. Instead, communicate with family members about effective ways to exchange presents. Families may draw names, set a spending limit on gifts, or only include children on a holiday list.

Select Events to Attend. The holiday season offers many opportunities for families to enjoy concerts, plays, displays, or church events, often at little or no cost. Providing children with exposure to memorable experiences can help to create new family traditions. Be careful to choose activities that are age-appropriate and will be appealing and pleasurable.

Establish New Customs. Each family comes with traditions and customs, but old practices don't need to be cast in stone. Families may benefit from determining which family traditions are important to preserve and which will be too difficult or controversial to continue. Initiate a discussion concerning new approaches to celebrating the holidays. Families may wish to include traditions they've seen modeled by other families, read about in books or magazines, or those associated with other cultural or ethnic groups.

Share Responsibilities. The holiday season often becomes stress-filled and chaotic as adults strive to do too much in too little time. Dividing tasks makes everyone, including new family members, feel welcomed, needed, and useful.

Reach Out to Others. Opportunities for volunteering are more abundant during the holidays than at any other time of year. Look for occasions to give back to others. Volunteering at a local food bank, visiting someone who is sick, or baking treats for an elderly neighbor can decrease personal loneliness and will model positive behaviors for children as well.

Get Physical. Holidays offer abundant opportunities for unhealthy eating and lack of exercise for both children and adults. Spending too much time snacking and sitting around the house often results in excess energy, which may be displayed in edginess, fatigue, or unhappiness. Children, especially, need opportunities to move about, preferably outdoors. Taking time to promote physical health often reaps positive mental health benefits, and can provide families opportunities to get to know one another and have fun as well!

Give Yourself Permission to Feel Emotions. Reflecting on one's own grief can be heightened during the holidays. Unfulfilled expectations may lead to feelings of sadness and disappointment in families with changed membership. Recognize that these feelings are normal – allow them to be experienced and managed. People are social creatures who often benefit from the help and assistance of others. Know when to reach out, and carefully choose individuals who can offer support and comfort.

Source: Dr. Linda Dannison for Family Information Services, Minneapolis, MN, © 2006. Reprinted with permission.

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