Holiday Stress: A Guide for Parents

What’s really important to your children during the holidays? You!

For so many families, the holidays are full of shopping, family visits, and routine changes, and the result is stress, frustration, and exhaustion. The shopping can be the most stressful, with children demanding everything they see on television or that their friends say they are getting, and parents not wanting to let them down.

The holidays, for most children, mean presents. And for their parents, the holidays can be a time of great financial stress. But what children really want is something they may not even be able to ask for, because nobody is “selling” it: more time with you, their parents.

It’s also a time when there’s a big focus on eating — a lot, and often unhealthy fatty and sugary foods — and drinking too much, neither of which leads to feeling well.

And although parents may think they are doing their best by overspending on the presents their children want, they should know that children pick up on tension and stress. Children know if their parents are drunk or hungover. They may also realize that the overeating and overdrinking are ways of coping with stress — not something that parents want to model for their children.

Instead, this is a good time to show that giving of yourself, rather than giving monetary gifts, can make for a wonderful holiday. Focus on time spent together. There are projects you can do, and you may actually find yourself spending more time with your children than you do the rest of the year.

Projects

Here are some activities you can use to model how to give the gift of time and yourself, instead of material gifts.

Make Fruit Sculptures

Instead of Mom locking herself in the kitchen slaving away while the children play video games in their separate rooms and Dad tries to assemble the latest high-tech teen robot toy, try enlisting everyone in a food project. Even if it only takes an hour, it’s an hour spent together. Remind everyone to wash their hands first.

• **You will need:** Fresh fruit pieces — orange or grapefruit segments, thin apple and pear slices, and grapes. Also, you’ll need thin-stick pretzels.

• **To assemble:** Put each fruit in a separate bowl, break the pretzels into different lengths, and have everyone create animals, flowers, and other decorative shapes.

Make Picture Pancakes

This is for older children who can be near a stove safely.

• **What you need:** Pancake batter, an empty squeeze bottle, and an assortment of toppings (syrup, jelly, honey, peanut butter, yogurt).

• **To make:** Put some of the pancake batter into the squeeze bottle and heat the skillet. Then squeeze face designs — eyes, a nose, a mouth — or other shapes into the pan. After 15 or 20 seconds, add some batter from the mixing bowl to cover the shapes. The design will be darker than the rest of the pancake.

Homemade Gifts

Not only do homemade gifts have a special feeling for both giver and receiver, but they can cut down on the financial stress of the season. Holiday placemats are one suggestion. It’s best to get them laminated.

• **What you need:** Copies of family photographs, construction paper, markers.

• **How to assemble:** Have the children choose photographs. They might want to pick a theme, such as a vacation, or a chronology as children get older. Then glue the chosen pictures onto the construction paper. Finally, have the child write a message that pulls together the theme of the photographs, such as “Granny and me at the lake in summertime.” Have the child sign the placement, and then take it to be laminated. The entire family...
can make a set of placemats highlighting special family memories. What a wonderful gift for family members.

Children can also give “I Can Help” gift certificates, such as “I can help you fold the laundry” or “I can help you set the table.” These make excellent stocking stuffers, and they also ensure that there will be more child–parent time throughout the year.

Volunteering

Even young children can participate in projects that help others, and the holiday season is a great time to do it. The whole family can visit older neighbors, bringing cookies, raking leaves, shoveling snow, and taking out the garbage. Children can prepare small bags for a local homeless shelter (toothpaste, toothbrush, washcloth, soap) or a gift pack for a food bank (cans and boxes of food). It’s also a good time of year to go through old clothes to find those that don’t fit and that are still in good shape.

This is a great sorting activity for young children, and it is good for them to see that taking good care of their clothes means someone else will have the chance to wear them.

By helping children understand the value of giving, and the value of time, they may be even happier this holiday season.

It also empowers children when they understand that they themselves, and their time, are something that someone else can value. “You mean if I spend a girls’ weekend with Granny, that is like a present for her?” one child asked her mother incredulously, knowing how much fun that weekend would be for the girl herself. That year, Granny received a card asking for a girls’ weekend, and both giver and receiver — and mom — were delighted.

If the holidays are for children, why not give them more of you? And let them give you more of them?

Source: Department of Health and Human Services.