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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Helping With Holiday Blues

Children commonly have behavioral ups and downs during the winter holiday season. These ups and downs are children's signal that they need extra help from their parents. Parents can provide this help when they keep in mind their child's individual emotional reaction to the holiday season, need for structure, and sensitivity to the emotional states of their parents.

Children's individual emotional reactions: Most children experience some stress as part of their overall emotional reactions to the holidays. Common holiday challenges include the visit to Santa Claus at the holiday season, for families that choose to follow that tradition. Parents are sometimes surprised to learn that young children often have conflicted feelings about Santa. Of course Santa is magically wonderful. But, Santa can be a scary figure, partly because of his outfit and also because he is such an important person for the child to please. After all, he controls the gifts. Furthermore, since he supposedly knows everything about children, many children worry whether Santa knows about their misdeeds and wayward thoughts, and if they will be deserving of gifts.

There are many other holiday challenges. Waiting for gifts can seem like an endless trial to a child. Gifts that are in view but cannot yet be opened can be a temptation that is hard to bear. Children may be required to meet less unfamiliar relatives, behave well, and sometimes even tolerate people with whom they are uncomfortable. During the school vacation, they may miss their classmates and teachers. Bedtime routines, so crucial for the young child's sense of comfort, may change. These changes may include staying up later, early awakening, traveling, and unfamiliar homes and beds. Children

may miss their parents when they are away at evening parties, and struggle to adapt to unfamiliar babysitters. Although scientific studies have not been able to clearly document this phenomenon, many parents have observed that excessive sugar from holiday treats will further “excite” a child.

With all of these emotional and physiological stresses, children’s excitement during the holiday season is often a mixture of pleasurable anticipation and real anxiety related to challenges that are pushing them to or beyond their limit. In the same manner that any child under any stress would respond, children under December stress have a tendency to “regress.” When children regress, they are no longer able to function at their usual level of maturity and will seek more support to help them manage.

Parents should compensate and provide extra support for their child whenever their child is overly stressed. We suggest two ways that parents can provide this support. The first is through providing structure (regularity and simplicity), and the second is through providing a positive and reassuring emotional ambience.

Children’s need for structure: Change is always a challenge for young children. They have a limited ability to switch quickly from one activity, place, and set of relationships. And, as we have already discussed, children must cope with a great deal of change during the holiday season.

The times when children are the most stressed are when they most benefit from the regularity afforded by consistency and structure. Children’s bedtime rituals illustrate the value of structure. Bedtime is a time of stress (anxiety) for children. Children must relinquish access to their helping parents at a time when they need help to manage the frustration of giving up the pleasures of the day and the loneliness and separateness of being in their bed. For this reason, bedtime can be a time when children display neediness, oppositionalism, defiance, or over-excitement. Parents help children at bedtime by providing a ritual, which is a consistent, predictable structure upon which the child can depend. Young children will sense the help that they derive from the simplicity and regularity of bedtime structure, and they will often insist that their parents stay true to all the details of the established ritual.

We can now understand children's December problems in a deeper way - at a time when they are feeling stress, and would benefit from increased structure, they are actually being offered less structure than usual because of all the hustle and bustle, visits, trips, parties, vacations, and so forth.

Children's need for parental calm: The positive and calming emotional tone of the parents is another important source of grounding for a child. Children are like little sponges who absorb their parents' emotions about situations. Parental calm will diminish the distress of children, and conversely, parental distress will accentuate any distress that children might be feeling. Unfortunately, during the holiday season parents are often unable to offer their calming presence to their children. After all, it's not just children who are stressed in December. Most adults describe similar feelings, ranging from feeling frantic or irritable, to frank experiences of anxiety, sadness, or depression.

During the holiday season, children will benefit from everything parents can do to maintain constancy, reduce newness and stimulation, and prepare for changes. Parents can also help their children by maintaining an active presence in their lives, minimizing their own obligations and stress, and listening carefully to their children's concerns about the holiday season as parents and child jointly seek solutions. It helps to create simple traditions that children come to expect each year and can take comfort from in the midst of the flurry. These suggestions are more easily offered than accomplished, because there is so much for parents to juggle during the winter holiday season. However, with forethought, parents can find ways to make changes that will make a significant difference to their children without fundamentally affecting what is important to the family during the holiday season. Children and their families will be the beneficiaries of these positive changes.

