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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Managing Holiday Stress**

The winter holiday season can be exciting, pleasurable – and stressful. By planning ahead, parents can help make the holidays a meaningful experience for their children. However, it takes some work and preparation to help children through the holiday season.

**The role of consistency:** Children and adults depend on order and predictability. Everyone prefers his or her particular balance of stability and change. Even adults who thrive on the stimulation of change also depend upon stability and constancy.

Children require even more stability and predictability than adults do to be emotionally grounded. After all, children are just building their internal foundation of stability and depend more on the external environment as an anchor. The younger the child, the more this is the case.

Change and Holidays: Imagine for a moment someone who mischievously set out to design a cultural experience for the sole purpose of decreasing the consistency in a child's life. Perhaps such a devious person would:

- Create a special day in which children are aware that they may or may not receive some of their most wished-for items, but must wait a long time to find out.
- Stress the parents, since a parent's stable emotional state is the bedrock of consistency and security in a child's life.
- Take a trip so children no longer have access to the predictable features of their home, room, pets, etc.
- Provide plenty of friends and relatives, some with their own demands, who the child may or may not know well, and who change the usual

family rhythms and routines.

- Keep children out of school or child care for a lengthy period of time, apart from their familiar routines, teachers and friends.

For good measure, our mischievous soul might add some of the following:

- An odd figure, appearing only at this time of year, dressing strangely, possessing the power to decide whether children receive their heart's desires, perhaps providing the presents only if children have been good enough, invading homes when children are asleep, encouraging young children to sit on his lap - all of which delights some children and worries others.
- Possibly a parent who develops the holiday blues because of his or her own life experiences.
- More babysitters than usual.
- Disrupted bedtime routines, particularly involving the loss of familiar beds and comfort items if families are visiting friends or relatives.

Such a mischievous person just might be creative enough to invent the American winter holiday season!

**Decrease holiday stress:** We suggest the following recommendations for decreasing holiday stress:

- Parents should pay attention to their own their emotional well-being. Parents' emotional stability and availability are top contributing factors to a child's sense of a solid foundation. Parental calm will diminish their children's distress, and conversely, parental distress will increase any distress their children might be feeling. Parents should eat well, exercise, get adequate sleep, limit activities and find ways to bring shopping under control. If the holidays are stressful for parents based on their own past experiences, it is helpful for parents to think about the reasons that they become depressed or anxious and talk with people who are understanding and supportive.
- Parents should be present in their children's life as much as possible, perhaps foregoing some parties or events.
- Parents should help children focus on values, whether secular or faith-based, including the value of giving to others. Holidays should not be primarily about accumulating and receiving. Children who receive, but

- are not asked to contribute and give, are more likely to feel entitled, greedy, and even guilty that they get so much and give so little. Children will feel more grounded and secure when parents find concrete ways to help them give to others during this season.
- Parents can develop special routines that provide structure and consistency during the holiday time. Encourage should be encouraged to actively participate in these traditions. They can help bake, decorate, deliver gifts and contribute to charitable decisions. One reason many people treasure these childhood holiday traditions is because they were a time of warmth and predictability during a season that had too many changes.
  - Parents can avoid those changes that are controllable.
  - It helps to avoid unfamiliar babysitters.
  - Children benefit when bedtime routines are maintained as much as possible. If the family is traveling, parents can take along their children's favorite comfort items, books and other treasured details of the bedtime routine. Maintaining a consistent bedtime also helps.
  - Parents should remember that while their 7-year-old can tolerate not knowing whether he will receive a particularly longed-for item, this suspense is too much for most 4-year-olds. There is no law that parents cannot spill the beans, allowing a child to gradually grow into a capacity to better tolerate the suspense.

Each family's holiday situation is different, so each parent will have unique opportunities and challenges. Although there are limits to what parents will be able to do, by prioritizing children's need for the support provided by stability and predictability, parents will find ways to make positive changes this holiday season.