



by Karen Stephens

## Holiday Frenzy: Don't Let Stress Steal Your Spirit

Holidays promise joy. They also bring crankiness, anxiety, whining, demanding pleas, and temper tantrums. And then there's the kids' behavior to endure! (Oh, you thought I was talking about the kids. I think you're an adult in denial . . .)

Chaos and over-commitment are energy draining. At this time of year it contributes to what I think of as the "holiday frenzy." You know what I mean. Children bouncing off the walls. Parents burnt-out before December rolls around.

Why is it so easy to lose the holiday spirit? For starters, families experience a time crunch — so many people to see, so many things to do. Divorce, remarriage, and blended families make it even harder to make sure all bases are covered. Children are bombarded with noisy, over-stimulating advertising that primes them into a frenzy of "I-wants, gimmes, and I-gotta-haves."

The drawn-out anticipation of holiday events (translation: gifts) can be excruciating for children. Overwhelmed children act up or withdraw into their own protective shells. Both responses tell us children are experiencing stress rather than joy — not the goal of any parent I know.

Can this holiday madness be avoided? It's a challenge not to cave in to the mayhem. But with wise prioritizing and planning we can help children experience the feelings we want them to associate with the holidays, such as warmth, togetherness, magic, and love. Following are tips to ward off holiday-related stress in your home.

- **Create a "to-do" list and a manageable time line.** This season eats away hours like they were minutes, so put your time management skills to work. Time management books await you at your neighborhood library or book seller. Pick one up. (And yes, I know, you won't have time to read it until the holidays roll around next year, but better later than never!)
- **Don't start "talking up" holidays too early.** Often stores promote holidays five months ahead of time — like tree ornaments displayed during an August heat wave! It puts a strain on children. As you know, waiting isn't their strong suit.
- **Don't over-plan festivities.** You don't have to indulge in every holiday tradition each and every year. Prioritize and delete those events of lesser importance. Keep your most treasured holiday rituals the same yearly. Rotate other activities every few years so they're fresh and rejuvenating.
- **Plan holiday events that are developmentally appropriate.** Attending the Nutcracker Ballet is a wonderful family tradition, but not when your child is a toddler.
- **Set priorities.** What traditions and values do you feel most passionately about passing on to your child? Let your answers guide your selection of holiday activities.
- **Make sure everyone in the family gets regular sleep, balanced meals, and exercise.** Healthy routines are the best protection against stress and stress-related illnesses.
- **Keep daily routines as consistent and predictable as possible.** Continuity provides a security blanket that keeps children (and parents) on an even keel. Maintain regular family rituals. Read bedtime stories despite being dog-tired from shopping. Holidays should add to our lives, not take them over!

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- **Help children anticipate what will happen during special events, such as a sibling's recital.** Knowing what to expect helps reduce anxiety and fear. Gentle reminders, and a role-play rehearsal, help children conduct themselves appropriately.
- **Alert children to schedule changes.** Inform children of holiday trips so they can anticipate and prepare for them. It's not fun to be taken off guard.
- **Keep most of your festivities geared to your children's interests.** Children benefit from activities geared to their understanding, skills, and abilities. Resist making children tag along to adult parties and marathon shopping sprees.
- **Empathize with your child's feelings, and respect your child's wishes.** If your toddler is afraid of Santa, don't push it. Walk as far away from Santa as you can. Kids get confused when you preach not to talk to strangers, and then you turn around and pressure them to talk to, and even sit on (!) a stranger's lap who is obviously trying to disguise himself with a fake beard and stuffed belly! You loved Santa's lap when you understood his holiday legend. Your warm and fuzzy Santa memories were probably from 4 or 5 years of age, not age 2. Give kids time to ease into what you had a whole childhood to experience.
- **Avoid duplicating holiday experiences.** Tell teachers and caregivers of your holiday plans so they aren't repeated at school or child care. There are some holiday rituals so precious they should be reserved for families to experience fresh together.
- **Plan relaxing activities.** Sensory play, such as playing with play dough or finger-painting, is soothing for children. Ten minutes playing with water and water toys can be relaxing. Outdoor rambunctious play and indoor dress-up play let children use their imaginations while releasing pent up energy and tension.

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- **Prevent frustrations.** Have enough materials such as wrapping paper, scissors, and tape on hand. And don't forget laundry, groceries, supper, homework, or child care pick-up!
- **Plan for quality time with the kids.** Children can feel abandoned amidst the holiday rat-race. Children lost in the shuffle whine to get parents' attention. Children lost in shopping aisles scream!
- **Assign age-appropriate holiday jobs to all.** Delegation makes holidays easier for everyone. Jobs may include shopping for gifts, making invitations, preparing simple food, or setting out napkins for a meal.
- **Breathe deeeeeply.** It's easy to get carried away with a harried holiday pace. Deep breathing promotes relaxation. (But beware, hyperventilation results in public embarrassment.)
- **Think "calm."** Consciously think about slowing down so you and the kids don't get too physically and emotionally exhausted. A "hurry-hurry-ding-ding" mentality ushers in the holiday frenzy with open arms.
- **Make time for adult companionship.** While holidays focus on family, it's also important to maintain your adult friendships. Make time for your own holiday interests, too. This may mean finding a reliable night-time caregiver to allow you to attend an evening concert or adults-only pizza party. It's good for your mental health to occasionally have a break from the kids, even during the holidays.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.