



by Karen Stephens

Resuming Routines Helps Kids Rebound From the Holidays

It seems like everyone gives a sigh of relief when the holiday marathon is officially over! Though most of us have grand times, getting home life back to normal can be a pebbly path to navigate. During the clean up, you find yourself asking what in the world has gone wrong. The kids are testy. After maxing out your credit card for gifts, you've actually heard the children moaning, "I'm bored, there's nothing to do!" They're into everything, bickering with each other, and gobbling junk food of all varieties. That state of affairs leaves parents frazzled, exhausted, and feeling taken for granted. And kids end up crying at the drop of the hat. Sometimes parents do, too!

News flash: This is completely normal! And understandable. Think about everything your family has experienced. While the holidays are exciting, they are also unpredictable and chaotic. Remember how important consistency is to kids? Well, the only thing consistent about holidays is that they are inconsistent! Daily routines and schedules go out the window. Meals are often "catch as catch can," with sugary, fatty snacks counterfeiting as nourishment. Bedtimes get delayed due to after-work shopping, wrapping, whatever. Vacations from school or child care and out-of-town trips register a jolt in family routine. And think about inconsistent discipline during holiday time. We haphazardly enforce expectations, limits and consequences. We make more exceptions so children can better enjoy the season. (Or so they won't throw a raving fit in front of the relatives.)

And there's the holiday musical chairs to consider: How many relatives' homes can you visit before the singing stops? Kids are shuffled from one home to another, seeing people they may hardly know. It takes kids a while to warm up to loving, but extended family members who might only see them once a year.

For families with divorce in their history, holiday vacations and visitation arrangements provide fodder for continued resentments between parents, and even grandparents. Regrettably, children often get ringside seats to round after round of tug-of-wars as parents punish each other by maneuvering for holiday time with the kids. Feeling completely helpless in the fray, grandparents' and aunts' and uncles' nerves become frayed and feelings intensely hurt. None of that escapes the kids in the eye of the storm.

When taking all that into consideration, it's no wonder kids have a hard time getting back to "normal" after weeks of holidays. Tapped-to-the-max energy level and mood swings take their toll. After all the weeks of holiday build up and celebrations, children's ability to cope with minor stress and frustrations gradually fades, often crumbling into inappropriate, uncooperative behavior and other symptoms of prolonged anxiety.

For kids, as well as adults, it's not unusual to experience a "let down" after the final crescendo of holiday events. The "holiday blues" is not just an abstract concept, it happens to real people, real families. For kids, holidays are over-stimulating. The more we hype the holidays, the more we can expect kids to become fatigued and cranky. As all parents know, tired kids make for some very unhappy campers.

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Add all that up and you see children's stress-related behaviors increase. Each child reacts to stress differently. Child reactions may include (but are not limited to): testing behavior (tantrums), regression in potty training or thumb sucking, fatigue, sleep disturbances, whining, trouble separating from parent, unusual withdrawal, aggressive behaviors toward others, rebellion, over- or under-eating, or nail biting (and even people-biting!).

Post-holiday readjustment takes longer for some children than others. You know your children best, and are aware of their typical recuperation time. After a routine has been re-established in the home, stress-related behaviors should lessen within two weeks, (perhaps a month for children with more difficult temperaments).

Now that the celebrations are over, the parenting challenge is to get back to basics. Below is a list of suggestions to lead the way. The sooner your household schedule and routines get back on track, the sooner your kids' typical behaviors will, too.

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- Re-establish regular family routines, whatever they may be. Before- and after-school or child care routines and rituals are especially important for promoting children's sense of security and stability.
- Facilitate healthy eating with reliable and consistent snack and meal times. Eat together as a family in your home at least once a day, no less. More often is better if your family schedule allows it.
- Make sure kids get daily indoor and outdoor play and exercise.
- Watch less television and videos. Play games together for leisure instead.
- Arrange for adequate sleep with dependable bedtimes.
- Take time to reconnect with children at bedtime using reliable rituals, like singing a lullaby or reading a bedtime story together.
- Expect chores to be done in the usual manner.
- Create quiet times for regular homework activities.
- Plan for at least weekly one-on-one time with each child.
- Re-institute once a week family meetings to air differences or make leisure plans.
- Re-commit to using positive guidance techniques.
- Be patient as everyone gradually gets back into the swing of things.

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*.

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