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Integrating Systems • Improving Outcomes

Parenting Infants & Young Children

Tips on Family Gatherings & Holiday Seasons

The holidays can be an **exciting and magical time** for young kids with presents, holiday activities and gatherings, family and friends. Sometimes we adults get so excited about making the holidays fun for kids that we overdo it and forget that what kids really need is **consistency in their environment, routines, and relationships**. The youngest among us need their caregivers to be consistently and predictably available. They need stable routines, and they need experiences that are fun and meaningful without being overstimulating.

Without this stability and when children are overtired and overwhelmed, they can miss out on opportunities often curated for them (e.g. all of those images of children crying on Santa's lap or large family gatherings when children act with defiance or tantrum) and adults feel frustrated and exhausted.

Here are a few tips to help you, and the youngest around you, get through the holidays with good cheer:

- **Routines are important especially when there is no school.** Bedtimes, bath times, and family rituals remain important. One or two late nights might be tolerated by young children but try to avoid several nights without adherence to bed time or too many missed naps. Try to plan activities around sleep times. And **don't forget meal times**. Be sure that breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks are still at regular times – either at home or out – so hungry tantrums don't creep up on you.
- Most kids love some activities, but get overwhelmed at some point. Try not to pack too much into one day. Pace the parties, visits, and festivities so kids and caregivers don't get run down. Breaks and downtime are important for everyone. Even if your child has dropped their afternoon nap, **allow for calm, quiet time** to settle. It is needed for all of us, especially our youngest.

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- Remember that kids do not always want to talk to or hug every family member or friend. Holidays can be very social which is really fun. But kids are often asked to interact verbally or physically with people they may not know well or see often. Even with very familiar people, children may not want to be touched or hugged. **That is ok.** This is a really good opportunity to teach children their body belongs to them and no one should touch them without permission. Allow for them to greet and say good by to friends and extended family **in a way that feels respectful for both you and for them.**
- It is not all about the presents. **More than anything kids want time with the people they love most.** Do not overlook the present of spending time with you – playing games or dress up, getting a treat, taking a trip to the park, or reading books together. Any time a caregiver is focused on their child, delighting in their child, learning about their child’s interests, and just playing is really meaningful to a child. We can’t always do this for long periods of time, **but even 10-20 minutes at time is really meaningful.** When we have time off for the holidays remember that this is the best gift of all – just being together.
- Don’t overly respond to a child’s exhibition of overstimulation. Even very verbal young children can express feelings of overstimulation through regression – tantrums, defiance, or refusal to do things you know they have the ability to do. Our job in these moments is to **remain calm and regulate ourselves** to support the co-regulation of the child. Punishment for expressing a need is not the goal here and won’t reduce the behavior. In those moments, reduce language, increase eye contact and proximity to your child, and let them know that you are calm and understand that they are having a hard time. **How does your child typically calm down?** Do they need alone time, a sensory object to settle, or closeness to you or another calming adult?

