

Making sure the holidays stay simple is not an easy task, but it is one of the most important things parents can do to ensure happy holidays with children.

Keeping children on a regular schedule is a must because having naps, meals and bedtime at the same time as usual will help children handle the holiday activities. Children begin to act out, may be clingy or cry more when their normal routines get out of whack. They also may seem to be more irritable and not behave the same way as usual. That is because younger children, emotionally and socially, haven't developed the skills needed to deal with a lot of change.

Parents should try to not let the stress they feel during the holidays affect the time they spend with their children. It can be stressful for children when their parents aren't spending as much time with them, so that is when they begin to act out. Spend individual time with each child to help them feel secure. That time should be given with undivided attention. Taking the time to hug, hold and talk to each child, even if it's only for a few minutes, will make a difference.

Children also can feel the emotion of their parents, though. Holidays have a tendency to get parents up-tight and stressed because of money, the excitement of family and friends getting together and trying to please everyone. When mom and dad aren't the same, children can start worrying, which causes them to act differently. It's important to know a child's personality, which also tells parents how much the child can handle. Don't get them into a situation they are uncomfortable in.

Explain to children what will happen for the day so there are no surprises. If they are old enough to understand, talk about the gift giving that is going to happen at a family gathering because their expectation may be totally different from what will happen. Talk to them about giving gifts and receiving gifts. Let them know that even though they may not get what they want, it's not about what they receive, but the thought that counts. This is a hard concept for children to understand, so it's important for parents to explain.

Also, talk about traditions and spirituality. If the family has religious traditions, focus on those. If there are other traditions the family does each year, explain why those traditions are in place.

Time management also is a key to happy holidays. Planning ahead of time for the holidays helps avoid holiday anxiety. Now might be a good time to plan out what is happening over the holidays on the calendar. Be sure to leave some down time in the schedule, though, to allow time to prepare for events, spend time with the children and relax.

Family traditions can be started from the simplest of activities, resulting in memories that last for years. The list of popular family activities that help cement the bonds of togetherness is a long one and includes meals together, spending time outdoors in nature together, house and yard chores, attending sporting events, long, quiet chats, board games and cards, and outdoor recreation, including playing catch and other yard games. The particular activity isn't as important as the fact that the activity is a vehicle for human contact.

The most important thing is to have fun. Lightening the mood and laughing will help parents and children enjoy the holidays.

For more information on keeping the holidays simple, ask for the "Creating A Strong Family: Enjoyable Time Together: A Journey of Happy Memories" (G1882) publication at your local UNL Extension Office, or available on the Internet at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs>