

## Keeping the Holidays Bright When Your Child Has Social, Emotional or Behavioral Challenges

By Karen Crum, Dr.PH, Persevering Parent Ministries

[www.perseveringparent.com](http://www.perseveringparent.com)

The hustle of the holiday season has arrived. While festive decorations, sweet treats and images of Santa Claus are exciting for most children, holidays can be difficult for kids who struggle with social, emotional or behavioral challenges. One year, my five-year-old was anxious that Santa Claus-- whom she identified as a stranger she had only met once at the mall—was coming into our house on Christmas night. She couldn't sleep until we reassured her that we would not allow him in that year. For kids who are anxious, many things about the holidays can be uncomfortable--the details of holiday travel, altered schedules, and even attention from infrequently-seen relatives. Kids who struggle with attention deficit or hyperactivity may feel under- or over-stimulated and act out during holiday activities. Long lines at stores or waiting to open gifts may trigger impatience. For children with shifting levels of energy and mood such as in bipolar disorder or depression, the expectations of family members may be difficult to meet as the appropriate mood may not always coincide with the timing of the holiday event.

A child's emotional challenges stress their parents during holiday events, as well. Moms and dads who normally accommodate their child's differences feel conflicted as they balance their child's needs with expectations of extended family or friends. The pressure of others' expectations can tempt parents to push their child past known comfort levels, triggering meltdowns or emotional crises.

Here are a few guidelines for parents that may help keep peace and joy during the season:

- Pay attention, adjust, and educate. Note what specifically bothers your child and adjust- even in the face of peer or family pressure. It is reasonable to urge and expect a child to push past some discomfort (we all need to do this) but if a holiday activity continually triggers major distress, you may need to modify it for the sake of mental health in your family. I know this can be hard. In my family, after many years of traveling to visit both sets of families at Christmas, we decided to slow the pace and do alternating visits. It involved some awkward moments and uncomfortable education of family members, but was worth the effort.
- Know that it is okay to skip, postpone, or modify a holiday tradition. The best traditions exist to *serve families* by providing moments of reflection over cherished beliefs or values. If we start to rigidly *serve traditions* instead, they can become burdensome and steal our joy. While it may initially be disappointing to modify beloved family traditions, you will find that new ones that "fit" your family's needs will serve you better in the long run. Stable kids are the best gift to parents during the holidays, and parents who learn to be flexible and realistic are blessings to their children.
- Consider the environment. For many kids, planning activities that are "abbreviated" and less formal makes it easier for them to emotionally and behaviorally adjust. Anxious, depressed or irritable kids may balk at over-stimulation, so it may help to separate big events like dinner, gift-giving, and tree-trimming onto different days. It may help to open a few gifts each day over a

couple of days rather than doing it all in one sitting. Events with long waiting times can be problematic for children with limited attention span, so cancel or plan those events to keep waiting at a minimum.

- Maintain a semi-normal routine when possible. Most children feel more comfortable when they can eat some familiar foods, wear preferred and comfortable clothing, and have breaks which “normalize” an abnormal day. Post a visual schedule of upcoming activities and talk to your child ahead of time so they know what to expect during a holiday gathering.
- Shift personal expectations about what the holidays should look like. Many people grow up with visions of what a “perfect” Christmas should be, with the *right* food, decorations, and a smiling brood of children. Even when we make modifications for our kids, families of children with mental illness learn the fault in this ideal when a happy event turns into a crisis within moments. My family experienced a reality check one year when my daughter got into a major altercation with another child right before our Christmas celebration. The magic of the evening was dampened, but I came to accept that “life happens” on every day of the year—even on holidays-- and that it was really okay.

Finally, as you experience your own holiday blurps, know that God specializes in bringing beauty from even the worst situations in our lives. In a strange way, some of our holiday difficulties in my family turned into blessings in my life. They helped me realize that the *normal* extravaganza of previous Christmas’s actually got in the way of celebrating Jesus’ birth because we had a tendency to be distracted by gifts, decorations, food or family traditions. Over time, I was able to more clearly grasp the true gift of Christmas-- that Jesus came to earth to restore lost peace and life to people living in a broken world. This brought me a deeper joy and appreciation for the season. Our difficult holidays led me to refocus on God’s best gifts-- eternal life (John 3:16), love (John 15:11), joy (Ephesians 3:18-19), and peace (John 16:33). Simply beautiful! Keeping this perspective can keep your holidays bright through many blunders.