

Mental health and the holidays: Stress for kids

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Q: We tend to believe that the holidays are a magical time for children and that the stress of it all is only felt by the adults. However, given the heightened emotions from the past 18 months of a pandemic, our kids are under stress, as well. What are the signs to look for, and how can we help them?

A: Even without a pandemic, holiday events can be stressful for [children](#). Family members who haven't seen the children for a while tend to focus a lot of attention on them, comment on how they've grown and changed, or hug and kiss them without asking. Even the change in activity level and managing multiple conversations and relationships can cause concern for kids.

Additionally, there may be pressure to get dressed up, take perfect family pictures, and be in a good mood for meals and events when that may not be how they are feeling inside.

"When you add in the fear of the virus still circulating in our communities, changes in school routines or even the death of a loved one, this [holiday season](#) may be particularly challenging for kids, and we should be sensitive to their feelings and needs," says Lisa Hardesty, Ph.D., Mayo Clinic Health System psychologist. "Remember that stress can be a natural and automatic physical, mental and [emotional response](#) to challenging events, and most children don't yet have the coping skills to navigate through on their own."

Some signs that children are stressed may include [emotional outbursts](#), increased irritability, trouble sleeping, withdrawal from others, struggles in school, frequent complaints of headaches or stomach aches, and increased defiance.

"Irritability and anger are common signs a child is overwhelmed because they are trying to get out of a situation that is causing them discomfort," says Dr. Hardesty.

Here are some tips for helping your child manage stress:

Plan ahead

Identify potential "pitfalls" and reduce barriers to success. For instance, make sure to promote optimal sleep and nutrition prior to new holiday experiences, and recognize that the level of activity and noise may be triggers for most children.

Consider creating space for them to express themselves

Children need help putting words to the complicated feelings they are experiencing. Depending on the age of the child, this may involve coloring or painting, or describing the emotions they are experiencing.

Set clear expectations. Children thrive on routines

Outline examples of behaviors you will and will not tolerate. When correcting children, tell them what you want them to do rather than what not to do. For example, instead of saying, "Stop chewing with your mouth open," try saying, "Please chew with your mouth closed."

Act, don't react

When children act defiant, take a deep breath and calmly correct behavior. Don't mirror their anger level. Remind yourself that your children are impressionable, and your words matter.

Pick your battles

If their behavior is simply irritating, try to ignore it. The moment they do something positive, compliment them. Sometimes children simply want a reaction, so try to react to the positive behaviors immediately instead of the negative. Also, be OK with children sitting out activities that cause them discomfort or anxiety.

Try to use humor

A good laugh doesn't just lighten a mood; it also activates and relieves the body's stress response. Find a way to laugh by redirecting children's attention toward positive games and activities, such as reading comics or playing a game.

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