

Mom & Dad's holiday stress a downer for kids, poll finds

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(HealthDay)—Many parents want to make the holiday season magical

for their kids, but for some the stress they feel trying to live up to that ideal may actually be doing the opposite.

A [poll](#) from Michigan Medicine found that about 1 in 5 [parents](#) said their [holiday stress](#) level negatively affected their child's enjoyment of the season. Meanwhile, roughly one-quarter of parents also said they set overly idealistic holiday expectations.

"People are surrounded by images depicting the holidays as a time of peace, love and joy. Many parents want to give their children those perfect magical memories to treasure for years to come," said Sarah Clark, co-director of the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health at University of Michigan Health.

"But all of the behind-the-scenes work to make that vision come true could have the opposite effect for some families," Clark continued. "Excessive parental stress can add tension and diminish the joy children associate with the season."

Mothers feel especially stressed, at a rate nearly twice that of fathers, the poll showed. Still, nearly all of the parents polled said the holidays are generally a happy time for their families.

Among the many changes that can affect the stress level of parents are negotiating holiday plans with different family members, the cost of gifts and travel, the resurgence of [COVID-19](#) in some parts of the country, and even having their kids at home full-time during the holiday break.

"An under-appreciated source of stress for many parents is having [school-age children](#) spending more time at home during the holiday break," Clark said. "In most families, school forces a [daily routine](#), with specific times for waking up, getting out the door, bedtime and meals."

Among those surveyed, one-third of parents said the extra shopping and tasks, keeping family members healthy and household finances were the cause of the extra stress.

About 23% cited [family gatherings](#), and nearly as many (22%) of the 2,020 parents of children aged 1 to 18 who were polled said making special holiday meals was stressful. About 14% said criticism from family members about holiday plans caused them stress.

"For many parents, stress is tied to placing unrealistic expectations on themselves to create a joyful holiday even if they don't have enough time, money or help to celebrate in the way they've envisioned," Clark said in a university news release.

Her advice? Clark suggested minimizing what you do to help trim that stress. Talk with your family about the highlights everyone enjoys and keep those favorites.

"It's OK for traditions to evolve over time, and for families to redefine what the 'perfect' holiday looks like to them," Clark said.

About 71% of parents polled said they reduced [holiday](#) stress with time alone, 55% listened to music, 46% exercised, 28% prayed or went to religious services, 23% got help from family members and 15% worked.

Among the parents in the survey, more mothers said help from [family members](#) relieved burdens, while more fathers saw work as a way to reduce stress.

"The [holiday season](#) may be a time for parents to model good mental health hygiene, by verbalizing how they recognize and try to relieve stress," Clark said. "This approach is an invitation for children to share their own feelings of stress and a reminder to take action when their

[stress](#) is elevated."

Though children and teens may feel like they should get a break from some of the normal rules that are in place during school days, Clark suggested a happy medium in which a structured schedule is eased but there are no changes in sleep habits or eating junk food, which can cause irritability.

"Sticking to some routines will likely help make everyone happier and [family](#) time together more enjoyable," she said.

More information: The National Alliance on Mental Illness has more tips for [avoiding holiday stressors](#).

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