

# Kids get holiday stress, too

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The holidays can be magical times for children, but they can provoke stress, which can manifest in different ways than with adults.

Schenike Massie-Lambert, program coordinator of the Rutgers Children's Center for Resilience and Trauma Recovery at University

Behavioral Health Care, discusses ways to keep children's [stress](#) at bay during the holidays.

## Why might the holidays be stressful for children?

**Massie-Lambert:** Children are extremely sensitive to [environmental changes](#). During the [holiday season](#), things shift in the environment and children are often exposed to adult caretakers who might be stressed about [financial obligations](#), saddened by the absence of loved ones or overwhelmed by numerous commitments. How these adults emotionally respond to their stress—for good or bad—models [emotional expression](#) and management to the children around them.

During the holidays, families also alter their typical daily routines. Changes to a child's typical mealtime, meal options—like [fast food](#) versus meals prepared at home—and bedtime can lead to significant changes in mood and behavior.

## How can adults tell that a child is feeling overwhelmed or stressed?

**Massie-Lambert:** Generally speaking, any sudden shift from the child's typical behavior warrants some additional attention and possibly a conversation.

If a caregiver notices changes in their child's sleeping pattern, eating habits, mood or social interactions, they should inquire about these sudden changes and bring in a professional if needed.

Keep in mind that many children struggle with emotional language and developmentally may not be at a stage where they are able to share their [emotional experience](#). In these instances, children may instead present

with physical concerns that are not connected to a medical condition. It is common for children who are experiencing stress to report things like stomachaches, back pain or headaches.

Massie-Lambert offered the following tips on providing support as well as discussing stress with children:

## **How can adults support children when they are feeling stressed?**

- **Model emotional expression and coping.** Caregivers are a child's first teacher and are uniquely positioned to teach and coach them through challenging times. The caregiver can work toward increasing the child's emotional vocabulary by using emotional labels for their own experiences and offering labels to the child when they are unsure of what they are feeling. The caregiver can also normalize the idea that we all have to work at maintaining wellness by discussing their own needs, such as for rest, and inviting the child into coping activities with them, like going for a walk, listening to music or journaling. This will also decrease the stigma associated with discussing emotions and seeking support.
- **Maintain routines that work.** Routines that are working for the child and family should be maintained because they support a child's sense of mastery and safety. However, if the routines that are in place are causing undue stress, they can be re-imagined to better support the families' current needs.
- **Avoid overscheduling.** It is challenging for adults to manage the stress and exhaustion that comes along with being overbooked, and the same is true for children. Caregivers can support youth who are overwhelmed by building in time for rest and setting firmer boundaries around their time by saying "no."

- **Encourage activity.** It can be tempting to allow [children](#) to overindulge in electronics like television and games, especially during winter months. However, remaining physically active is not only great for a child's physical health, it is also a great tool for managing stress and releasing tension in the body.

## What is the best way to talk to children about stress without stressing them out?

- **Share your observations and inquire.** Support a child who is struggling with managing their stress by sharing your observations and any noticeable signs of distress. This lets the child know that you are engaged, concerned and willing to help.
- **Normalize and validate emotions.** Normalize and validate the child's emotional experience. This is especially helpful because it gives you another opportunity to decrease the stigma that is associated with wanting and needing additional help. This strategy is important because it can potentially increase the supports and resources that are available to the child.
- **Empower them by practicing problem solving.** Ask the child to reflect on previous stressors and what was helpful in navigating them. Encourage the child to identify additional solutions.
- **Empower them by inviting them to choose a coping technique—then offer to do it together.** Encouraging the child to select a coping strategy increases engagement, autonomy and self-efficacy. This also gives you the opportunity to provide additional support.

Massie-Lambert added the last two tips will provide the [caregiver](#) with an opportunity to build the child's resilience and problem-solving skills.

Provided by Rutgers University-New Brunswick

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