

## Children's Concerns During the Holiday Season

The holiday season has expectations of being a magical time spent with family, friends, good food, and gift giving celebrations. In reality, everyone is standing on crowded lines, feeling pressure to buy their children all the “in” toys, and figuring out how to avoid dreaded Aunt Katie. And through all of this, one has to manage to get in holiday parties and gatherings on an already overscheduled day. This disconnect between what we think we should do and feel during holiday time and what we are actually feeling causes many adults stress and discontent. The stress inevitably always trickles down to our children in some form. In this posting, I will bring to your attention some of the common complaints that I hear from the children in my office during the holiday season and ways to address it.

**“Mom/Dad is never home”.** – This is quite common during holiday season. Parents are out shopping or going to parties (business and pleasure) and children are home missing the comfort of their parents. Prioritize your party calendar. You do not have to attend every single holiday party in town. While you are out, often the T.V. or video game systems become the child's babysitter. The children are going to bed without their usual good night hugs and kisses. Choose your events sparingly, not only so that you can be around more for your children, but for your own well being as well.

**“We are always running from place to place and I keep missing my dance class”.** – Children often complain about not having any control over where they are being “dragged” to. While some of this is an inevitable part of being a child, be careful not to take your child away from their regular sources of joy in their life. Children's routines create a sense of comfort and structure as well as a sense of calmness and stability. Holiday preparations can be very time consuming, but try to stick to your normal family routines as much as possible. If something in your child's life has to be missed, discuss plans in advance and try to include your child in the planning process. Maybe your child wouldn't mind giving up their tennis lesson for a visit to Uncle Bill, but not their dance class. Remember that changing plans or last minute decisions tend to increase stress. Also, be careful to leave some down time to relax and just be home with each other. Take a break from holiday related stuff to just spend some quiet time getting a snack, reading, or playing a game.

**“I'm worried about my mom”.** – Regardless of the time of year, children are very in tune and sensitive to the feelings and emotions of their loved ones. If you are anxious and stressed, you will inevitably convey those feelings to your children. Often children are puzzled by their parent's behavior, but they sense that something is wrong. As a result, they are left with a general feeling of uneasiness. Even worse, sometimes children imagine problems that are not even accurate. If something is affecting you during the holiday season, or any other time for that matter, speak to a professional about how to manage the problem and determine how to talk to your child about it. As the adult, you need to take care of yourself and get help if necessary.

**“I didn’t do my homework and went to sleep late because we got home too late”.** – Now this is usually said in excitement, not as a complaint. However, too many of these nights are problematic. Children need plenty of rest. While it may be exciting to stay up late, lack of sleep often leads to increased irritability and losses in concentration and focus. Also, you want to make sure that children understand that school work is a priority. Just as much instruction goes on during holiday season as any other time of the year.

**“I miss Grandma Beth”.** - The holidays can be a very stressful time for families that have recently lost loved ones and really don’t feel like celebrating without them. However, in general, it is a good idea to uphold family traditions even if a family member is absent or no longer around. These traditions have important grounding effects by letting kids know that even though some things have changed, other things have remained the same. If you have traditions, take time to explain why they’ve stayed in your family and savor them. They are sources of comfort for children. It’s OK to discuss loved one’s that are no longer with you. There are many ways to celebrate the memories of loved ones such as candle lighting or just the simple sharing of loving memories that you have had with them.

**“Dad promised he was getting me an I-Pad and now he said no”.** – As a general rule of thumb for any time of year, don’t promise something you can’t produce and don’t say something that you can not follow through on. In terms of gift giving, don’t confuse “stuff” with love. Remember to give the gift of time, which is what children truly crave. Along those lines, we also have to teach our children to be realistic. It is OK to say to your child that a certain toy or object of their affection is too expensive. Children have to learn that their wish is not someone’s command and they need to curb their desires for instant gratification.

The holiday season can be a time of joy, wonder, and personal renewal. Or it can leave you drained, emotionally, physically, and financially. Remember that over expectation and unrealistic goals that everything should be perfect can only lead to disappointment and frustration. If you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, chances are those feelings are trickling down to your child. Keep an eye out for signs of stress in your children. Look for head or back aches, nightmares, irritability, or out of character behavior. If you need additional assistance feel free to contact me at 203-3600 ext. 5286. I wish you all much health and happiness during the holiday season. Celebrate togetherness and enjoy the true meaning of the holidays!

