



Surviving the Holidays

Disrupted schedules, traveling with little ones, the crash and burn from all the excitement — holidays can easily be a recipe for tears and tantrums. Here's how to manage life during the holidays to minimise the tears and maximise the joy.

1. The most important tip, as always in parenting, is to manage yourself so you can stay calm.

Remember that the holidays can actually be stressful for children. Your child depends on you not only to regulate their environment, but also to help them regulate their moods. If you're anxious about everything you have to get done, your children will almost certainly begin to act out. Every day, find ways to keep your own cup full. If you're running on empty, you won't be able to help your kids stay on an even keel.

2. Give kids plenty of warning about travel and upcoming events.

At the beginning of the holidays, you might use a calendar to show your child what will happen each day. ("Then the day before Christmas we leave for Grandma's, where you'll get to play with all the cousins.") Many kids love to make a little book in advance, where each page represents a new day and they draw a picture of what will be happening. Sit down for a snuggle every morning and describe the day ahead.

3. Coach your kids about the social behaviour you expect.

Role play with them in the car before you arrive, or make a game of it before you go.

"What do you say when Aunt Susie gives you a present?"

"What if you don't like the present?"

"What do you do when Uncle Norman wants to hug you hello?"

"What if you don't like the dinner that's served?"

"When you want to leave the table, how do you ask?"

"What will you do if the cousins start arguing?"

4. Plan no more than one event per day.

If you're visiting your in-laws, where possible, don't also plan the morning with the cousins and the afternoon at Aunt Betty's. Kids need downtime, just to chill out, snuggle, and do whatever relaxes them. If they don't get it, they'll melt down or get oppositional when the over-stimulation gets to them.

5. Have age-appropriate expectations.

If you're doing a lot of visiting with adults, be sure the kids have something to occupy them. If they can read, buy them a new book for the occasion, one they can't wait to get into. If they're too young to stay absorbed in a book, bring a favourite movie. Be sure your schedule includes visits to the playground or other opportunities for the kids to get some fresh air and physical activity.

6. Watch your kids' food intake in the midst of too many treats and busy schedules.

Many tantrums originate from hunger. And all parents recognise the sugar high that sends kids bouncing off walls and then crashing into tears. If necessary, speak with your relatives in advance about limiting treats. And carry small protein-rich snacks with you so your child doesn't have a melt-down while the adults are negotiating where to go to dinner.

7. If you go on holiday, be sure it recharges and reconnects your family.

Some of us look forward to the school holidays as a chance to leave town in search of warm weather or winter sports. That can give you plenty of chances for family connection, especially if you forgo organised evenings in favour of family board games. What you want to avoid, of course, is racing around before you leave, getting stressed

out by a busy trip, and returning home in need of a holiday. Kids tend to get cranky and stressed with travel and schedule changes, so plan accordingly.

8. If you're flying with kids

...be sure to arrive early enough that they get to "run" a bit in the airport hallway after sitting still in the car and before sitting still on the plane. If there are two adults, send one to pre-board and grab an overhead bin, while the other one waits to board with your child, to minimise the time he has to sit in his seat. Make sure to change nappies and use the bathroom just before boarding. If you use overnight nappies (more absorbent), you might get lucky and avoid a nappy change on the flight. Special secret for painless flights: bring small wrapped "presents" – books, treats, chapstick, puzzles, simple crafts – for each child. Kids can look forward to getting one as soon as they've buckled their seat belts, and several more whenever you need a distraction mid-flight. If your little one is not nursing, be sure to bring bottles, sugar-free lollipops or something else to suck on during take-off and landing to minimise ear pain in those little ear drums.

9. Keep children on their regular schedule as much as possible.

When children are off school, the lack of structure can be liberating — for them and for you. But unpredictability can also be stressful for kids, so many children do better if you impose a little routine during the holidays. It can be very simple, just a plan for the day so that no one is surprised by all the transitions. Don't forget to include outdoor time and physical activity, which all children need to stay regulated.

10. Do less, connect more.

There are so many wonderful opportunities during the holidays that we often find ourselves taking on too much and getting into a bad mood. If you notice this happening, pare back your schedule to do only the essentials. Your kids don't need a magazine-spread holiday. They need you, in a good mood, living the spirit of the season and spreading love and good cheer. The minute your mood veers from loving to frenzied, STOP. Hug your children and regroup. And at the end of the holiday, pat yourself on the back and congratulate yourself on a job well done.

Sometimes we could all do with someone to talk to. If you would like to meet Roxy for a confidential and non-judgemental chat about you, your child, or any other worries, she is available on Tuesdays, 9-10am. You can call/text Roxy on 07730416019 or email her at roxy@schools counsellingpartnership.co.uk