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Holiday Stress-Busters: Advice for Parents

by Ann Svensen

The holidays are right around the corner — are you having fun yet? If you are, Ann Vernon would be surprised. As a counseling professor at the University of Northern Iowa with her own private practice, Vernon hears from a lot of exhausted parents this time of year. She says, "Most are striving for the Currier and Ives Christmas of their childhood, but in reality they're dreading the holidays."

How can you beat back the dread and have the family holiday of your dreams? "Start by lowering your expectations," advises Vernon. "Be more realistic about what you can do. This usually involves changing the tradition — it can be equally as good, but it has to be unique to your family." The following tips can help:

1. Reassess and Prioritize

Holiday stress sets in when you try to do it all. "Stress is an emotional reaction to circumstances that you feel are out of control," says Vernon. "To cope, take some time out, rethink what's stressing you out, and look for alternatives." Vernon also advises changing your demands to preferences: Tell yourself, "If I have time, I'll do this and that. If not, I'll only do that."

2. Delegate!

Does the house need cleaning or decorating? Let each family member be responsible for a room. Or Vernon suggests, create a "job jar." Everybody takes a turn choosing what his or her job will be. Jobs can be color-coded according to age. "When you delegate, you have to make your expectations clear to your kids, and you may have to lower your standards a little bit," says Vernon.

3. Don't Give in to the "Gimmes"

"I want, I want!" This familiar phrase can wear parents down over the holidays, but giving in to your child's every request can cause financial distress. Psychologist Dorothy Cantor says, "It's okay to tell your child that a gift is too expensive. Tell him that even Santa Claus has limited funds."

Another way to fight the commercialism of the holidays is to beef up on the traditions that don't cost any extra money. Vernon says, "Bake cookies, go caroling, give to needy families, or volunteer. Explain to your kids that there are a lot of families who don't have as much as they do." To get kids into the spirit of giving, ask them to pick a few of their old toys to donate to the less fortunate.

4. Be Realistic About Relatives

When the in-laws visit this season, have realistic expectations for the short term. "Don't try to solve past issues with family members over the holidays," warns Vernon. "It's not the time to bring up every little irritation. Use discretion." And if going to a certain relative's house every year causes a lot of holiday stress, decide if you really need to do it. Maybe you can go every other year instead.

5. Flexibility Can Buy You Time

How can you get anything done when the little ones are home on vacation and you only have a few days off? University of Indiana education professor Janette Shaw suggests parents take turns looking after kids with neighbors or colleagues. And Vernon recommends hiring a babysitter to take the kids to the movies or to play with them for a few hours while you're working around the house.

6. Set Limits for College Kids

A college student home for the holidays can wreak havoc on family routines. For months now, your teen has been on his own and doing things very differently. The disruption could be the college girlfriend who plans to sleep in your son's bed. Or perhaps your daughter is now accustomed to sleeping with the radio blaring.

Whatever the case, you'll need to set some ground rules in advance. "Everyone's going to have to compromise during the visit," says Vernon. "So it's important that parents and kids be respectful of each other."

Above all else, Vernon says parents should take it easy on themselves over the holidays: "This time of year, people are so concerned by what others might say about them if they don't do everything perfectly." Ask yourself what imperfection *really* means. Surprise! You're human — like everyone else.

Five Signs You Need to Bust Some Holiday Stress

- You're irritable.
- You're losing sleep.
- You're losing or gaining weight (this can be hard to tell around the holidays — it could just be all the good food).
- You feel tense — with muscle aches or headaches.
- You feel overwhelmed.

Resources

For more on managing everyday stress, pick up a copy of *The Working Parents Help Book* by Tom Price and Susan Crites Price (Peterson's).

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