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COMMENTARY

Chloe Learey: Surviving the Holidays

Editor's note: This commentary is by Chloe Learey, the executive director of [Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development](#) in Brattleboro. She serves on the Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council, a governor-appointed body that advises the Administration and Legislature on early childhood care, health and education systems.

This time of year brings a multitude of holidays and celebrations from across cultures and religions, from Sweden to Mexico, Christian to Islamic. It is a time of year that brings joys and challenges for families and young children. Knowing this can help alleviate some of the stress that accompanies this roller coaster ride. Below are some common themes that may come up and thoughts about how to deal with them.

Routines are disrupted. Between special events at school and work, travelling to visit friends and family, and celebratory meals and gatherings it is easy to get off schedule for meals, naps, and other regular activities. This can be part of the fun, and a great opportunity to practice developing skills around responding to change and being flexible. It is still important to eat as well as possible and to get good rest, it may just need to happen at different times. Maybe a cat nap at 2:00 will get your child through the rest of the day even if s/he usually sleeps for an hour in the afternoon. Or a hearty afternoon snack may look more like a meal if lunch time was crackers in the car. Children will pick up on the cues of the adults around them, so if parents are able to miss the typical bath night and take it in stride, it will help a child be able to “roll with it” too. Keep what routines you can, and anticipate how to meet needs in other ways when they are disrupted.

Trauma can be triggered. Certain times of year can bring up negative feelings for those who have experienced traumatic events such as the death of a close family member, separation from their family of origin, or divorce. Realizing that the season may be a trigger helps provide a framework for understanding what may be happening and reacting accordingly. While the experience of trauma and coping mechanisms will be individual, one recommendation that cuts across is the reminder to take a break and leave space in your schedule. Being open about needing space to either be alone and quiet or to go do something totally different, whether for you or your child/ren helps others be supportive. You do not have to be at every party, every concert, every meal, every gift opening. As noted below,

all sorts of high expectations come up during holidays, and managing them can help minimize the stress of the season.

Expectations can be high. The holidays bring an abundance of opportunity for high expectations – around gifts, around showing up, around being happy, around showing gratitude. Identifying which expectations are self-generated and which are coming from external sources is the first step towards addressing them. Does your child expect the Christmas tree to be loaded with presents or is it your expectation of yourself as a parent to be able to give them everything they want? This is a wonderful opportunity to talk about values and what you want to do as a family to celebrate and appreciate the season. Establishing rituals together like volunteering, donating gifts to others, and supporting a charity or cause to support together creates the opportunity for shared expectations.

Financial worries can cause anxiety. Holidays can be a season of spending whether it is gifts, travel, or food and drink for gatherings. It is easy to lose track of all the expenses, and they can add up quickly. The pressure to create a perfect holiday for our children is heavy, and remembering the importance of the holiday is not found in fancy decorations and expensive gifts helps lighten the load. Having a frame for gift giving can help, too. A parent in a radio interview shared that she gives just 4 gifts to her children: “Something you want, something you need, something to wear and something to read.” While this does not outline the size of the gifts it offers a way to limit giving and potentially expenses.

Ultimately the holiday season is time-limited, and keeping that in perspective helps make some of the above suggestions easier. Nothing is perfect, and sometimes our funniest family stories can be the mishaps that happen, like the time the dog ate all the pies off the counter. Perhaps the greatest opportunity of this time is that it helps us shine a light on our love and appreciation for each other, and expressing that is the ultimate gift.

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