

Keeping the Holidays Happy

by Jennifer Brickmayer

Many people who care for young children are surprised, baffled, hurt, and sometimes just plain angry when their efforts to make holidays fun for children seem to end in tears and tantrums. Often children who joyfully anticipate a holiday seem to go to pieces when the occasion actually arrives.

Holidays, while they may be happy, can be periods of [stress and tension](#), and young children are the first to let it be known—usually loudly and directly—that they are feeling the strain. The following principles may be helpful in making realistic plans for celebrations that are as pleasant for caregivers as for the unpredictable small people with whom they live.

1. Children need consistency and sameness, even in the midst of festivity. Preserving bedtime rituals; allowing for a leisurely story, song, or cuddle; and playing a familiar game may be important even on very special days. It is not unusual for children to ignore an exciting collection of new toys to retrieve and play with a toy they may not have looked at for months. This doesn't necessarily mean they don't like their new possessions. It may mean they need to reassure themselves that some things remain the same, although holidays bring many new and interesting experiences.

Children may also try to reassure themselves that parents and familiar adults remain the same—even in the middle of holiday events. They may demand to be carried, hugged, or rocked or in some other way indicate their need to know their parents' first concern is for them rather than for the new and somewhat disconcerting happenings around them. At a gathering of friends or family, a parent may have to find a quiet and private place for a few minutes of leisurely talking, singing, or cuddling with a preschooler who is finding the party overwhelming.

2. Children are interested in processes rather than products. They want to be involved in every aspect of holiday preparation from [cookie baking](#) to gift wrapping. Save your elaborate recipes for a few years and reassure yourself that people you care about understand the lumps and bumps of a package tied with preschool "help." Streamline or shortcut baking, cooking, decorating, and wrapping so that children can feel an important part of "getting ready." Even two-year-olds enjoy "decorating" cookies—and does it really matter if more of the decorations end up inside the child than on the cookies? Keeping preparations in small, easily managed steps will allow all to enjoy the holidays.

3. Children like to understand what's going on in their world. They need calm, leisurely explanations of the [customs, rituals, and occasions](#) that form a rich part of their cultural heritage. In the rush of special activities, it's sometimes easy to forget to explain why we have special days, and why we celebrate them as we do. A too long anticipation

time might also cause overstimulation and anxiety for children. Preschoolers often expect immediate gratification of their desires; waiting “weeks” for a special holiday to arrive might result in confusion and tension. Limit the period for holiday preparations (three weeks is long enough). Providing an equal amount of exciting and stimulating experience with routine, consistency, and sameness will provide happy memories.

4. Children need to alternate quiet activities with active ones—and perhaps exciting ones with quiet ones. It is hard to maintain a fever pitch of excitement for a full day in any family without producing tears and frayed tempers. People who live with young children should be very sensitive to their needs; change tempo when children demonstrate that they are reaching their limits of excitement, boredom, or fatigue.

If parents realize a child has reached the height of enjoyment of gifts, a few unopened packages might be surreptitiously hidden for later, or the child may be left to play undisturbed with a familiar or new toy. At a family dinner, one parent may need to remove a small child who needs a few calm and pleasant moments alone with an adult. Bedtime at the end of a big day is often hard to accept. A parent who plans ahead may have saved a small gift or treat, or perhaps a special story or song—not as a bribe, but as a way of easing the transition from day to sleep—for a child who finds it hard to make such a transition without help.

5. Young children are most comfortable in small groups. The old rule-of-thumb, “Have the number of guests the child is old to a birthday party” applies equally well to other occasions.

Crowds of people are often overstimulating to preschoolers. Shopping and sightseeing experiences are not likely to be as pleasant with small children as reading and singing.

The same principles that apply to planning good days throughout the year apply equally well to holiday celebrations. Close relationships with calm and loving adults; small amounts of excitement broken up with frequent quiet, relaxed activities; understanding of traditions; and involvement in preparation for celebrations should help make holidays happy ones for preschoolers and their families.

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