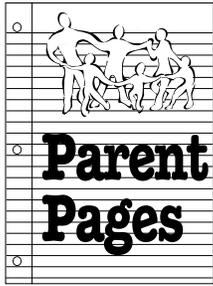


Keeping the Holidays Calm for Young Children



Don't let kids wait too long for Santa

Santa Claus may have landed already at your local shopping center,

but parents who want to make the holidays meaningful and pleasant for their children won't give in to the commercial pressure of beginning the preparations and celebrations too soon. A long anticipation period can be very difficult for children to cope with. Children have a different sense of time. Six weeks to a child can seem like an eternity of waiting.

A lengthy anticipation time can create over-stimulation and anxiety for children. Preschoolers often expect immediate gratification of their desires; waiting six weeks for Christmas to arrive may result in confusion and tension. They may express their feelings through whining, crying, irritability, tantrums, and other behavioral changes.

Parents should try to keep the situation under control. Three weeks is a long enough time for children to prepare for the holiday season. Don't give in to pressures to begin activities sooner.

Parents can also try to insulate their children from the barrage of television

commercials, but shouldn't expect their children to be totally immune to them. Saying no to everything advertised on television and fighting over it may be worse than giving in on some things. Go along a little bit with what they would like, but help them develop the values you'd like them to have.

Prevent holiday meltdowns

Sometimes it seems to parents that the more effort they put into making the holidays fun for young children, the more they get tears and tantrums in return.

During the holiday season it's better to do one thing calmly than 10 things frenetically. The pace is often what does in parents and children alike. Too many new and exciting experiences and too much of a change in the daily routine can throw everyone into a tizzy.

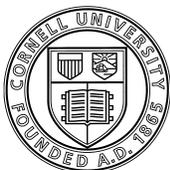
Slow it down so children can participate in holiday activities in a satisfying, simple way. Make preparations in small, easily managed steps that you can all do together. Children can help with things that are done in advance of Christmas, like food preparation or selecting gifts or making cards, but don't provide too many exciting activities at once. When it comes to baking, for example, make just one plain kind of cookie or streamline the process by using ready-made



cookie dough and let the children do the decorating. Remember that from the child's point of view it doesn't matter what the cookies look like, it's the fun of making them together that counts. The same goes for holiday decorations and making or picking out and wrapping presents.

Children should be encouraged to think about giving presents, not just receiving them, and understand that this is a time for sharing and expressing love. If possible, let children make or pick out the things they would like to give others. Encourage them to think about what the other person would like and don't confuse monetary worth with importance. Young children enjoy mak-

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ing a card, picture or simple handmade gift and doing so helps them learn how to be givers as well as receivers.

Stick to comfortable routines

Another way to help make the holidays more pleasurable is by sticking to regular routines as much as possible. Children need consistency and sameness in their daily lives as well as stimulation. When this balance gets out of whack, as it invariably does during the holiday season, everyone can feel out of sorts.

Maintain bedtime rituals and, when you can, allow a little extra time to answer the questions young children will have about all the goings-on. Often, in the rush of too many activities, parents forget that children need calm, leisurely explanations of the customs and rituals of their particular holiday tradition.

Since it's often difficult for young children to accept going to bed at the end of a big day, talking quietly, reading a story or singing a song related to the holidays can help calm everyone down.

Paying attention to routines goes for adults, too. Having a sense of control and not being exhausted is important. Then you're ready to enjoy the family time together.

Very simple things satisfy young children. They are pleased and reassured by repetition. So keep it simple, keep it manageable for a holiday season that's a happy one for little people and their parents.

Source: Sue West, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, NYS College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

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