



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 19

Helping Children and Parents Enjoy the Holidays

The holiday season is upon us and most parents find themselves dreaming of family gatherings filled with warmth and generosity, surrounded by children who are well behaved, polite and most of all, happy. For many families, however, those picture-perfect images are often all too quickly replaced with the harsh realities of handling some of our children's less than perfect behaviors. Parents can find themselves feeling frustrated, angry and resentful, as our children seem to fall apart right when we most wish, and need, them to hold it together.

Understand and Accept Your Children's Temperament

All children are born into this world with their own way of responding to what is going on around them. This is referred to as your children's temperament. Some children are born with easy temperaments where they seem to naturally go with the flow of the holiday season, are not bothered by changes in schedules and routines, and do not seem to mind all the excitement. Other children are born with temperaments that are not so easy to parent and seem to show signs of distress right from the start of the season. Some of their challenging behaviors might include increased crying, tantrums, clinging and even excessive energy, and it all adds up to extra stress and frustration for parents.

One of the best ways you can support your children is to take time to recognize and appreciate your children's unique approach to the world. The holidays flow much more smoothly when you take into account what each child needs in order to feel comfortable and successful in any given situation. Being tuned in to your children's temperament helps you to organize your children's environment so that behaviors can flow more smoothly and you can provide a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved. For example:

- children who have difficulty coping with changes in routines may need your help to forewarn them about those changes and they may need more time to adjust and transition from one activity to another;
- children who are sensitive to lots of stimuli, like crowded malls and noisy parties, may need access to quiet places where they can unwind and calm down;
- children who are shy around relatives they have not seen in a while may need your permission to slowly ease into family gatherings and may need your reassurance before they feel comfortable in new situations;

- children with high activity levels may need to be given acceptable outlets for their energy.

Understand what behaviors are developmentally “normal” for your child’s age

In addition to your children’s temperament, some of the demanding behaviors that you may see can be characteristic of the developmental phase your children are in.

Much like the “terrible two’s, some stages of development bring with them behaviors that are often challenging and difficult regardless of what time of the year it is. Children will cycle in and out of stages of disequilibrium, where they may be more out of sorts and irritable, and stages of equilibrium, where their behavior is much smoother and easier to parent. It helps to keep in mind that developmental stages are a normal and necessary part of your children’s growth.

Understanding where your children are developmentally can give you tremendous insight into their behavior and help you to know that your children are not acting a certain way on purpose. If you find that your children are going through a particularly difficult stage, you can lessen some of your holiday stress by staying tuned in to their behaviors and adjusting activities and schedules as needed.

It helps to try to anticipate when and where problems may occur and plan ahead to avoid them. For example, if you know your five and a half year old is in a particularly “bossy” stage and having a tough time delaying gratification, you may want to call ahead to grandma’s house to find out what she has planned, especially with regard to opening gifts.

- Prepare your child with this information so he knows what to expect during the visit.
- You can spend time practicing respectful ways for him to express his frustration.
- You may need to be more vigilant just in case he needs your help to manage emotions.
- You can also share your understanding of your children’s development with others so they can be more empathetic about the behaviors they see.

Also, teach your children the skills they will need to help them feel successful when they encounter difficult situations. For example, if they find themselves starting to feel anxious, you can teach them to find a quiet place where they can regroup or give them permission to pull out a book to calm themselves down for a little while. By teaching them the skills to manage some of their own behaviors, you enable them to take care of themselves and to feel good about doing that.

Be aware of activities and schedule changes that might be influencing your children’s behavior

It helps to make note of any external, situational factors that might be having a negative impact on your children's behavior. These might include:

- any disrupted sleep and eating patterns as a result of traveling or visiting friends and family,
- over-scheduled calendars, and
- any extra holiday shopping trips added to your daily routine.

These events for the most part are things that grown-ups have come to expect as being part of the holiday experience, but for children, they can be an invitation for meltdowns and frustration. If you find your children reacting negatively as a result of your busy schedule, slow down! The rewards will be well worth it.

Become aware of your own expectations

Make sure the expectations you have for your family regarding the holidays and your children's behavior are not set too high. Are you expecting your children to behave a certain way and are they capable of that behavior? For example, expecting a two year old to sit quietly through a holiday meal may be a little more than he or she is developmentally or temperamentally capable of doing.

As the holidays unfold and as you begin to make plans, it helps to think about what your children will need and what you will need in order to feel satisfied and successful. Use this information to set expectations for behavior that are more easily attainable and that are based on your own unique family. Share with your children your expectations and listen to their feelings and concerns.

- Finding the balance between meeting our needs for creating a memorable holiday and our children's needs to act like children can be tricky. By honoring the qualities that make your children special and understanding their unique approach to the holidays, you provide a gift that will help you and your family have a smoother and more enjoyable holiday season.

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