

Newsday

Long Island, NY December 17, 2006 Circ. 474,750

ALL IS CALM?

Not by a long shot, if your household is like most over the holidays. Try these tips to keep you and your kids on an even keel.

By Claudia Gryvatz Copquin
Special to Newsday

For many of us, the holidays equal going into high gear to create a Norman Rockwell idealization of family gatherings. And that means setting up certain expectations for our children, which is fine - as long as we're realistic about their capabilities. For example, if your 6-year-old has never been taught to mind her manners at the dinner table, it's silly to expect her to do so during Christmas dinner with the extended family.

Your child's general disposition and temperament also should be taken into account. If your toddler requires a daily nap, for example, it's in everyone's best interests not to skip it while visiting relatives.

Most helpful during this busy time of year: maintaining a sense of routine for children. "When kids know what to expect, they are always much more cooperative," explains Lori Barrett, a child development specialist and co-founder of ThinkerTots, a company that offers classes for infants, toddlers and preschoolers in Bayside and New Hyde Park.

Other tips to keep your household calm and your kids at their best:

Order in the house

Cleaning the house for holiday entertaining can be a family activity, but how to get the kids to help?

Round up the family for a five-minute meeting, Barrett suggests, and set up a timeframe for straightening bedrooms and cleaning bathrooms.

"Lay out what the expectations are and give each person their roles." And make it fun for the children, setting timers and perhaps offering prizes for the best effort.

Playing dress-up

Kids may balk at dressing up, but "if not during festive or religious occasions, then when?" asks etiquette consultant Cheryl Lee of Elmont.

What if your tween's interpretation of dressing up for grandma's means ripped, low-cut jeans, exposed belly-button and hoodie? Explain that an effort to look nice is required, says etiquette expert Leah Ingram of Pennsylvania, who runs mannersmom.com. And do take your child shopping for a special outfit, but be willing to negotiate. "As a parent, you need to make sure your notion of 'dressing up' is timely and modern," she says. After all, you don't want a well-dressed child who is miserable.

A family of strangers

Holiday gatherings can be fun, but people who don't see your family frequently could be frightening for small children. One way to ease your child toward these virtual strangers is to show them photos or family videos in advance, suggests Barrett. Home movies of previous holiday celebrations with the "strangers" are especially helpful because they tend to show family rituals, such as an uncle giving a toast, she says. These will then be more familiar (and less frightening) when everyone is together.

Of course, there's still a chance your little one will dislike one of your guests. If that happens, "defuse the situation as quickly as you can," says Barrett. Take the child aside and try to get a sense of why. If she's too young to articulate the reason, just steer her away from the objectionable person and towards a beloved one.

The displaced child

It's common for houseguests to settle in one of your children's bedrooms, leaving the child with a sense of displacement. If so, "explain that it's for a limited period of time, but turn it into something fun," says Ingram, a former Smithtown resident.

If your kids have to share a room, allow them an indulgence. Bring in a television set or pop up a small tent, just for this occasion. Let them eat popcorn in bed or read books under the covers with flashlights.

"This will highlight the positive instead of accentuating a negative situation," Ingram says.

Freezing a meltdown

With so much unusual activity during the holiday week and no school routine, meltdowns are inevitable. Barrett suggests planning ahead to prevent this. "If you know your child is very regimented, you have to respect that.... If your 2-year-old needs a nap at 2 every afternoon, get him to take a nap," even if that requires driving around grandma's block several times.

Or your child could have a tantrum because he's simply overwhelmed by the hubbub associated with gatherings. Just remove him from the room and calm him down. Then recruit an older cousin to entertain him with a quiet activity, such as a book or a board game. Or "set up the child somewhere quiet, in an upstairs room, with a video or the television," Ingram suggests.

Junk food overload

Eating too much sugar also can trigger undesirable behavior in your children, not to mention undesirable calories. Temptation lurks at every holiday table: pastries, cookies, cakes, chocolates, candy canes.

So give your kids a dessert limit in advance - perhaps three cookies or one piece of cake. They may not adhere to the specific amount, but your instructions might prevent them from a total overload. Also, offer substitutes, such as pretzels, nuts, crackers or cutup carrots or celery.

When a gift disappoints

We've all witnessed it at one parenting moment or another: the face of a disappointed child upon opening a highly anticipated gift. It's one thing when that happens in the privacy of the immediate family; it's an altogether different experience in front of aunts, uncles and grandparents.

Experts agree that children should be polite and say thank you with their best poker face. So, on the way to the family celebration, "rehearse in the car how gifts will be handled," suggests Leah Ingram, an etiquette expert based in Pennsylvania.

KIDSTUFF

TOY

The N.S.E.C.T. robotic attack creature (Tyco, \$79.99) packs a wallop, writes Eyavonne Drayton of Hempstead, above, who tested it. It "has power claws that can grab things," Eyavonne says. "It has soft darts that can shoot up to 25 feet. It comes with a battery and charger so you can keep on playing with it. You can transform N.S.E.C.T. into other creatures, too."

Ages 8 and older

BOTTLE ADAPTER

Holiday travel and extended visits at relatives' houses can tax even the best parent's planning ability. What to do if you're stuck out and about with a thirsty baby and there's no bottle in sight? With BabySport's new water bottle nipple adapter, you can turn any water bottle into a baby bottle. Packaged with one silicone nipple and two adapters to fit most bottles, it makes any fresh water bottle safe for babies or toddlers. Or mix powdered formula into the bottle, for an even happier baby. Available at 7-Elevens; \$1.95.

Infants and toddlers

PARENTAL GUIDANCE

With children under 4 accounting for nearly 90 percent of deaths and 80 percent of emergency room visits due to airway obstruction injuries, the holiday season is an especially important time to guard against choking dangers, says model Farley Boyle, a New Jersey mother of three who has appeared on the series "Runway Moms."

Boyle founded C.H.A.S.E. for Life (CPR, Heimlich, Awareness, Safety and Education) after her 2-year-old daughter, Chase, was saved from nearly drowning when her husband did CPR. With dishes of candy and nuts all around, and floors covered with new toys and small parts, Boyle offers these tips:

Don't let children under 3 eat small, hard or round food, especially hard candy. Don't let small children eat unattended.

Certain foods are easy to choke on, regardless of size - cut grapes into fours, just like hotdogs.

Check all toys for small parts and recycled toys for damaged parts.

Clear floors and low surfaces of small objects such as toy parts, buttons, beads, marbles and coins.

For more: chaseforlife.org.

Schedule time for yourself

Unfortunately, the holidays and tension sometimes go hand-in-hand. "Everyone is kind of vulnerable due to the stress of preparations. Also, the holidays are emotional times for all of us," says Lori Barrett of ThinkerTots, based in Bayside and New Hyde Park. Family reunions can open old wounds; relatives can get into arguments; and an unattainable desire for domestic perfection coupled with our children's demands, particularly when they are off from school, can all lead to feeling quite on the verge. So, it's crucial for parents to seek out down time just before or even during the holiday week.

So schedule a spa treatment, a manicure and pedicure, coffee with a close friend, a walk in the park, a movie ... indulge in any activity that does not involve your children or family members, but that does involve relaxation and de-stressing.