



'TIS THE SEASON FOR CONNECTION!

As we look ahead to the holidays, many expectations may come to our minds. We could be expecting great family reunions filled with love and laughter. We might be dreaming of our favorite foods and have our hopes set on a picture perfect moment gathered around the table. Whether it is music, decorations, or traditions, most of us enter into holiday seasons with joyful expectations.

For some of us, holidays are more nuanced. They can bring up reminders of family and friends who are no longer with us, as a result of a recent change or one from the past. We might be missing people or traditions because of loss, distance, or time. Family dynamics that might not be at the forefront the other fifty-one weeks of the year are suddenly brought to light.

For some, the mixture of emotions that comes with the convergence of expectations and reality can make this time of the year anything but simple. As adults, we can learn to cope with the bittersweet feelings as our close friends, family, and community support us. We can learn to navigate excitement and disappointment, joy and grief, laughter and tears. But what about our children?

Enter in - “childlike wonder.” Whatever our expectations for ourselves, we often expect excitement, joy, and laughter from and for our children. Visions of family game time, cookies, hot chocolate, music, and story time may come to mind. While holidays can absolutely be filled with laughter and sweet moments together, sometimes our expectations are blown away by our realities. If, during this season, you sense this stress - you are not alone. What would it look like to thoughtfully prepare for disappointment, grief, or tears?

Excitement and stress have similar physical effects, and our children may experience emotional meltdowns as reality hits. Children thrive with routine and structure, and holidays by definition are a “break from the norm.” Travel, changes in schedule, and being around more people more often are just a few potential stressors. Managing expectations (and the expectations of little ones) is no small feat, and we have a few ideas that we’ve found to be helpful.

With a bit of preparation and healthy expectations, the holidays can be a great opportunity for family connection! We hope these ideas can support you in preparing your family for the holiday season.





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EXPECTATIONS

- Be FLEXIBLE!
- Manage your expectations before they manage you. Be realistic about what is reasonable for your family in this season and stage of your life.
- Know your options! You can opt out if needed. You can provide scaffolded support if needed. You can pivot to plan B (or C, D, E, F, G) if needed.
- Prepare a backup plan. If your child can't sit through the silent Christmas service or a large family dinner, be understanding.
- Expect big emotions and be prepared to support your child as they manage these emotions.
- Leave margin in your schedule to support your children as they are navigating their expectations and stress.
- Prepare your family members for the possibility that your children might have strong emotions or unexpected reactions to the stress of the season. This will help them gauge their expectations as well.
- Remember that unmet expectations typically equal disappointment and/or frustration. Show empathy and kindness when your family encounters disappointment. Show yourself compassion too, when your expectations go unmet!

KEEP IT STRUCTURED & SIMPLE

- Create holiday schedules that attempt to stay close to meal, snack, and bedtime routines.
- Build holiday traditions. These are an important part of creating a healthy family culture. Find a few that you can begin that are enjoyable for your children and can be done as they get older. If you have children in your home who are experiencing their first holiday with you, attempt to incorporate traditions from their past.
- Simplify whenever possible.
- Avoid over hyping experiences and keep it calm.
- Beware of sensory overload.
- Remember to meet basic physical needs such as nutrition, hydration, sensory needs, and sleep. A quick snack and remembering to hydrate every 2 hours can prevent blood sugar drops. Adequate sleep may be hard to come by, so be mindful that sleepy and hungry children are not “bad” children, they are simply sleepy and hungry.





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GIFTS

- Your children might not have the reaction you expect to gifts. Allow them to receive and respond the way they need to under that pressure.
- If you feel they need support on giving appropriate responses then practice a few options before the “big moment.” Something as simple as telling them they can say “thank you so much” or “I appreciate you thinking of me” even if they don’t love their present from Great Aunt Susie can go along way to help you all avoid an awkward moment.
- If you have multiple children, keep gifts fair. Try to have the same number of packages for every child to open.
- If your child has fine motor delays, use gift bags and tissue paper over wrapping paper for ease of opening.
- Remember that disappointment is a strong emotion even for adults. If your child isn’t getting their big wish list item, then the best gift you can offer them is compassion, understanding, and the freedom to be disappointed without shaming them for being ungrateful.

TRAVEL TIPS

- Prepare children in advance of the trip. Read stories or create social stories about traveling and holiday events.
- Create visual schedules or cues to help manage anxiety with a change in routine
- Create a sensory retreat area or “take a break” spot.
- Create a sensory box filled with some fidgets, weighted items, and creative outlets (coloring materials, play doh).
- Pack a bag of toys for the car with both favorite items and new/novel toys. A few new items from the dollar store can go a long way to help manage travel boredom.
- On a road trip, take movement breaks every few hours.
- Bring earplugs or noise canceling headphones.
- Offer to bring food you know your child will eat.
- If staying in a hotel, call ahead to request any special needs such as room location, etc.
- Bring a vinyl cover to place under sheets if your child wets the bed.
- Remember that along with changes in routines, traveling brings new sensations, sights, and smells. Be prepared to help manage disorientation that can come with changes in environment.

