

Preparing your kids for the holidays during COVID-19

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Even though this holiday season may be different, you can still find ways to connect with loved ones.

Like most things this year, the holiday season will be marked by the coronavirus pandemic. For you and your family, it may feel like one more disappointment at the end of a long, challenging year. So, how do you talk with your kids about the upcoming holidays? And what can you do to celebrate, even if it's not in the ways you're used to?

To answer these questions, we turned to Erica Lee, a psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry at Boston Children's Hospital. She offers some advice for parents on how to cope — and ideas for ways to celebrate — as this holiday season approaches.

Talk it out

"The holidays are traditionally a time to come together with loved ones. For those who look forward to celebrating, this year might feel particularly hard," says Lee. "If your kids are having a tough time adjusting to changes in your plans, let them know you

understand and that you feel disappointed, too. Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings and help them appreciate why things have to be different.”

Lee says she recommends starting to talk about the holidays a few weeks ahead of time. This will allow you to modify your holiday plans without giving your kids too much time to dwell on any disappointment they may feel. Then sit down together as a family and come up with a plan for how you will celebrate.

Focus on what you can do

Whatever holidays your family celebrates, Lee suggests focusing on the rituals you can continue to do together — rather than focusing on what you can't do this year.

“Think about which holiday rituals are most meaningful to you, and then come up with some ideas for how to continue those traditions in a new way,” says Lee. For example, if your extended family is used to gathering together for a meal, plan a meal over Zoom or FaceTime. “Have everyone prepare the same meal, or just one special or favorite dish, so it’s truly a shared experience,” she says.

Other rituals you can recreate include getting together online for Thanksgiving to share what you’re thankful for. Or if you celebrate Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or Christmas, plan a time to light your menorah or kinara candles together, or set up a time to simultaneously decorate or light up your Christmas trees.

If you’ll be skipping a flight to grandma’s house this year, try cueing up a video on YouTube that simulates a flight. “The idea is to think about recreating what you’re used to doing in a way that’s safer during the pandemic but still allows you to create special memories.”

Create new traditions

Think of this year as an opportunity to start new traditions and think creatively. “Talk with your children and extended friends and family about new ways to make this holiday season special, and how to stay connected, despite the challenges of the pandemic,” says Lee.

Some ideas she suggests include:

Take turns hosting mini holiday celebrations. Spread out your holiday celebrations with several short, online celebrations. For example, one family could host a time to sing holiday songs, another could host a dance party, and another could host a time for storytelling or prayer.

Send each other care packages. Send your favorite holiday treats, special mementoes, or small gifts and open them together over Zoom or Facetime. “The packages don’t need to be big or expensive, but are a tangible way to reach out and tell each other we care,” says Lee.

Work together on a shared project. Start a crafting chain for a holiday-related project and share with other families or friends. “You could make a holiday ornament or treat, and send it to another family, and then have them add to it and send to the next house,” says Lee. “Or you could make a holiday decoration for one household, they can make one for the next family, and so on. Collectively working on a project can help us feel closer to one another when we’re physically apart.”

Enjoy some friendly competition. Have your family or kids make holiday treats, and then vote for the best over FaceTime or Zoom. Or put up holiday decorations outside, so you can drive or walk by, and then cast your votes.

Document what you’re doing. Whether you’re creating new traditions or celebrating in the ways you always have, keep a journal or take photos or videos to document this year’s experience. “Though things will be different for most people this year, it could be really special to look back years from now and remember this time,” says Lee.

Take the opportunity to scale down

Lee says it’s important to remember that, for many people, the holiday season and large family gatherings also come with a certain amount of stress.

“This year has been hard. This might be an opportunity to scale down and focus on the parts of the holiday that are most meaningful to you,” she says. “Give yourself permission to take it easy this year. Instead, focus on staying connected and staying safe.”