

# 7 Tips to Manage Your Child's Routine During the Holiday Season

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The winter holiday season brings with it much more than wonder and merriment. Weeks and sometimes months of holiday shopping, traveling, food, parties, visits and visitors can create enough stress to exhaust the most festive of us.

Children of all ages feel it, too, especially when their routines are interrupted with an overload of events that are often out of their control. The changes in schedule, though well-intentioned, can impact behaviors and moods.

"In general, we all do better with routines in day-to-day life," said Dr. Mollie Greves Grow, a pediatrician at Seattle Children's

Hospital. "Structured routines, even during busy times like the holidays, help parents regulate the emotional and functional changes their children undergo as they develop. Routines help children know what to expect as they go through these changes."

The mother of 5- and 7-year-old girls, Grow speaks from experience as well as expertise. She offers parents several tips and reminders to help foster a peaceful and joyous holiday season for the entire family.

## Prioritize sleeping and eating

There will be some deviation and relaxation from a normal schedule during the holidays, but parents should stick to their child's sleeping and eating patterns as much as possible.

The amount of sleep recommended for children varies with age. Toddlers typically sleep 11 to 14 hours in a 24-hour period; preschoolers 10 to 13 hours; school-age kids and preteens 9 to 12 hours per night; and teens 8 to 10 hours. Eating on a regular schedule also helps maintain energy and blood sugar levels. If planned parties or meals conflict with your child's eating schedule, work to find a middle ground whenever possible and bring along healthy snacks if needed.

For toddlers and younger kids, adhering to a consistent eating and sleeping schedule makes it less likely they'll have a meltdown. "Regardless of age, we function better when we eat and sleep right," Grow said.

## Take part of home on the road

Comfort items from home may help your child acclimate to a different environment: a pillow, blanket, noise machine or favorite stuffed animal. For infants and toddlers, call ahead to see if a pack-and-play or a crib is available where you'll be staying.

## Be open and honest with family

We tend to see more extended family around the holidays. They may not always be aware of the rules and routines your household follows. A good approach is to be forthcoming and explain why something is or is not allowed for your child.

## Set limits when it comes to diet

The holidays offer easy access to unhealthy foods and dessert items that shouldn't be consumed in big quantities. With younger children, it's easier to choose what is put on their plate. As kids get older and make more decisions on their own, this can be a challenge.

When it comes to diet, moderation is key. Grow suggests one way to encourage moderation is to have the parents set limits on the quantity of certain types of food and then let the child decide what they eat. An example is allowing a set amount of sweets per week (i.e., one per day or only on a weekend) and leaving it up to the child to decide when they get to treat themselves.

"Have a conversation with your child and explain that the limits on consumption aren't a punishment, rather, to help them stay healthy," Grow said.

## Develop a game plan for screen time

There may be more access to television, computers and mobile devices at home while children are on holiday breaks from daycare and school. One way to manage this is with an age-appropriate media and screen time plan. The American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines on the subject and commonsensemedia.org are both great informational resources for parents.

Many of the same holiday specials parents watched as children are still popular today ("A Charlie Brown Christmas" first aired in 1965). Use your discretion in how many of these you allow your children to watch. When you do allow them to watch, be with them and discuss the lessons taught in the special. Make it more than just a show. By watching together, parents can be "media mentors."

## Plan for group activity

It is up to parents during holiday breaks to find a substitute for the physical activity that is part of a child's normal daycare or school curriculum. Prepare for the indoor and outdoor options in your area by having the right rain or

snow gear and attire available. Whatever options are available, try to make some of those family activities and have your child help decide those activities. These can be opportunities to create family traditions.

## Enjoy the moment

Many of the frenetic activities we take part in during the holidays are not meant to take center stage, but often do. Focus on creating memories with your child. It's a great opportunity to make the breaks from your routines special instead of stressful.

"Kids grow fast. They change quickly and each year is very different for them," Grow said. "It's important for parents to slow down, be present and enjoy this time of year with their children."

## Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics Media and Children Communication Tool Kit
- Commonsensemedia.org