

CHRISTMAS - a special time for all

Christmas is a very special time, especially for children. It can be a time that they will look back on with pleasure all their lives. It can also be a stressful time. Good preparation and thinking ahead can avoid many of the pitfalls and make sure it is a happy rather than a stressful time. Every culture has its own special celebration times, so what happens for Christmas can be thought about for other celebration times as well.

Planning for Christmas

Christmas celebrations and other family or cultural celebrations are times when everyone has high expectations. Expecting a lot, the pressure of planning for celebrations and the coming together of family members can also be a cause of stress.

- Families are important for teenagers - even if they would rather be somewhere else. Try to do a deal - that they spend some time with the family celebration and some with their friends.
- Postpone family feuds - Christmas is a time when people are likely to be tired and under stress. It is the time to let lots of things pass and not take offence, and to avoid bringing up issues that you know will be hard to deal with.
- If you feel pressured by media advertisements to spend more than you can afford, talk with your children about what Christmas really means to you and your family, and what is really important.
- Make a time around Christmas (not necessarily all on Christmas day) to spend with family members or friends who you enjoy being with but you may be too busy for at other times.
- Plan for special time to spend with family in the days after Christmas especially if the time before has been very hectic.

Planning for a safe Christmas

- If you have ornaments on your Christmas tree, or Christmas lights, make sure that toddlers can't reach them. Ornaments often break easily and have jagged edges and Christmas lights are a temptation for beginning explorers to unscrew.
- Holly and mistletoe are poisonous, keep them out of reach of children.
- Watch that young children cannot get to cigarette butts or leftover alcoholic drinks - these are poisonous to young children.
- Negotiate with older teenagers about who drives if there is to be alcohol.
- Try to avoid too much driving - especially when people are tired.
- Have a fall-back plan for teenagers who go to parties, eg send a phone card/phone money/mobile phone - let them know they can call you and you will come if they need. (Don't lose your cool at the time - save questions for the morning when all feel better).

Christmas customs

Customs are important to families and part of family traditions. Think about your family customs (the special things you do), are they still useful or should some change? Keep what is good from the old and add some new ones if you need to as the family changes. This is also important for stepfamilies where there are two lots of Christmas customs to be considered. Family customs don't always have to be the old ones - new and changing families can make new customs. They are best if they develop out of what happens at your house, but here are some that some families have, to start you thinking about yours.

- Everyone has a stir of the Christmas pudding and makes a wish.
- Everyone in the family pulls a name out of a hat at the start of December and then does something nice for that person every day until Christmas, and gives a small gift to the person on Christmas day.



"Shes making a list and checking it twice ..."

Good planning reduced Chris' pre-Christmas stress.

- Invite a neighbour or someone who is on their own to share part of Christmas.
- Have a neighbourhood party or get together. Meet your neighbours. It need not be elaborate.
- Decorate or make decorations for your Christmas tree as a family affair.
- Share your Christmas celebration with someone from another culture, and then share their special celebration.
- Sing carols together or read the Christmas story on Christmas Eve.
- Customs that include giving to others less fortunate can be a very warm and learning experience for children, eg taking Christmas presents to a charity as a family outing, or the old concept of the Christmas bowl at the table where gifts are left for charity.
- There may be special difficulties for grandparents if they have to let go some of the customs that have meant a lot to them. Think how everyone's needs can be included.

Here are some things you could think about.

- **How** you do things, eg who makes the Christmas pudding, who arranges what? Sometimes the same person has taken all the responsibility for arranging and would like a change, or preparations could be shared in a different way.
- **Who** shares your Christmas? These are likely to be the important people in your life.
- **Where** do you have your celebration, who decides? Is it always at grandma's, and has anyone asked her if she would like a change. Sometimes when parents are elderly but still like the gathering at their home it can be done in a different way, by everyone else bringing the food for example.
- **What** you do - is this still as suitable for a family with teenagers as when the children were younger?

Tips for Christmas Day

- Christmas has a spiritual dimension. Take some time to include this in your celebrations.
- Don't put children to bed too early on Christmas eve - they will not get more sleep but will probably lie awake. Put them to bed at the usual time and have a relaxing story to help settle them.
- Injuries happen because everyone is busy and there may be no-one to supervise the children, eg in pools, or with new toys such as a bike that children don't have skills for yet.
- Try new toys/equipment with supervision - riding new bikes, skateboards etc, without enough skill causes many injuries.
- Have back-ups for emergencies - spare toy batteries, a video the children enjoy.
- Excitement is part of Christmas - if it seems to be getting too much, step in and offer an activity to focus their thoughts, eg a quietish game.
- Plan ahead for your celebrations so that you are not trying to do too many things at once. Christmas with two families is sometimes better spread over two days rather than all crammed into one.
- Leave time on Christmas Day for a sleep, a walk or an outdoor game - whichever appeals to your family.

Coping with stress

With the best of goodwill the excitement of Christmas can cause stress. It can easily become too exciting for children and cause tears and tempers. Here are some suggestions to help when children become overstressed.

- Take time out to deal with it at the time even if you need to get someone else to mind the cooking.
- Space helps with stress - go outdoors, go for a walk, sit in the garden, listen to or sing carols.
- Use quiet rather than exciting activities - read a story to the child, watch a suitable video with the child on your knee, play a quiet game, use children's meditations (there are many books about these).
- Be sure that you look after your own needs, let things wait while you take time for yourself if you need to.
- Slow down.

Enjoying the holidays

The much-awaited Christmas holiday break can be a lot of fun but it can have its own stresses for parents and children who are not used to being home together all day. Here are some tips to help make the holiday more enjoyable.

- **Share the time.** Arrange it so your children have their friends over one day and then another day they go to their friends' homes. This gives all parents a break and on the day you have all the children they are often happy to do things with each other. It means also that the days when you have your children to yourself you have more energy to enjoy them.
- **Share the care.** Go out together with friends and their children sometimes. The children will enjoy playing together and you will have the companionship of another adult.
- **Go out.** It is helpful to have a change of scenery once a day even if it is only a walk around the block or a picnic in the garden.
- **Have simple meals.** Cold meat and salads and fruit are just as healthy as cooked meals and save a lot of energy in cooking and washing up. You could cook a large roast and use the left overs for colds meals. Every meal does not have to have meat. Salads with cheese and eggs or cold tuna are just as healthy.

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