



9 TIPS TO PROTECT YOUR KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

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By Dr. Dina Kulik

Parents around the world are stressed about the upcoming holiday season. The holidays are usually a time of magic and joy for the whole family, not a time of strife and anxiety and loss.

We will need to find new ways to bring holiday cheer this year, but don't despair - I have you covered!

Here are my favorite 9 tips to help your kids (and you!) feel happy and joyful this season:

1. BE REALISTIC

This holiday season is not like previous ones, and hopefully not like future ones either! There is no point of denying that. We want to be realistic and set appropriate expectations, but that doesn't mean being a huge bummer either!

Perhaps this is the year to introduce new routines and traditions to your family fun. Have you dressed up in previous years in holiday PJs? Perhaps this is the year. Maybe this is the year to add in special baking time. Consider making your child's favorite cookies or cake or decorate a gingerbread house. We can't be with friends and family in person but creating memories with others via virtual call can be a new tradition you can keep up for years to come. Borders are removed with virtual connection. This year we will make cookies with our relatives all the way in Australia!

2. MINIMIZE THE OVERWHELM

Many of us are overwhelmed and anxious over the holidays, trying to ensure everything is just right. But things are not alright. And that is ok. It is what it is. Each year I am stressed about overcommitting and filling up my schedule with holiday activities and tasks.

Though we all want to see loved ones right now, the silver lining is less need to cook and clean and get gifts for everyone you would usually see in person. There are fewer tasks to be done, and that extra time you save can be spent with your immediate family, giving them even more attention and love. The pandemic is giving us a reason to slow down, clear our schedules and focus on the here and now.

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3. MAKE A PLAN

Kids and adults alike love a plan. All of us will benefit from knowing what to expect; when special meals and activities will be, and where, and how we will celebrate in our current circumstance. Give your kids something to look forward to each day. Children get excited about small things.

It could be a special virtual call with a loved one. It could be a new book you will read together, or a meal you will cook together. Festive arts and crafts are a favorite activity in our home, and I plan on having a mini project to do each day. One (masked and socially distanced) trip to the dollar store will provide all the simple items we will need for a week of relaxed family time.

4. KEEP TO ROUTINE

Kids (and we!) thrive on routine and value predictability. Holiday time is no different. If your kids have mealtime and bed and naptime routines, try to stick to those. If there is consistency and predictability in the day, you will decrease the risk of tantrums and battling.

We all want a bit of calm back in our lives! Schedule virtual connections with loved ones during the times you would usually have in-person get-togethers, not around meal or sleep times. You want your kids at their best!

5. STAY ACTIVE

There is nothing better for your family's mental health than activity. Consider taking a family walk every day, or go skating or tobogganing, being mindful to minimize risk of COVID exposure as per your local public health guidelines.

We recommend that every person get at least 1 hour of 'heart racing activity' each day, and this is a time you can share as a family, doing a fun activity that will brighten your day and make your body and brain feel lighter too! If we role model healthy, active living, our kids are far more likely to replicate.

6. CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN

One challenge in the pandemic is the loss of control. It feels uncomfortable to not be able to plan far in advance or make choices as freely. This is a good time to focus on what you can control.

Consider what is important to your family and incorporate those traditions and activities into your day in a new, pandemic-aware way. You may not be able to share a large holiday meal in person, but you can bake or cook for others to enjoy in their homes. You can decorate your home in a fun and festive way. You can create holiday cards for family and friends or involve others in activities with you virtually. We can share the joy, in new and innovative ways.

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7. FOCUS ON YOU!

This time of year can be stressful and anxiety-provoking. We have an opportunity to slow down and take a breath. You, as an individual, are a key piece to your family. You are likely the rock, the protector and the comforter. We need you to be happy and confident and whole. That requires you to take care of you too.

Try to set aside even a few minutes a day to do something that you love. Get some exercise, alone. Call up a friend or go for a distanced walk with someone. Have a nap. Have a drink. We can't draw from an empty well. Doing something for you each day will allow you to feel your best, so you can be the best parent you can be.

8. ACKNOWLEDGE GRIEF

You are likely feeling a sense of disappointment. We all are. And so are your kids. This is ok. We can acknowledge that sense of loss for a typical holiday season, but not dwell on it. Instead of focusing on the negative, focus on the exciting activities we can do.

For example, 'I know you were excited to open your presents with your grandparents in-person, but guess what? We will call them and open them together anyway, and you can see them and thank them. And you can make them special thank you cards too, and they can open those too!'

9. FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE

This is not the holiday season we want or expected, but we can't change the situation. If you are down and sad, your kids will feel that energy. They are little sponges. You don't have to hide or deny your disappointment, but you can acknowledge it, give it brief attention, and move on. Even if you have to 'fake it till you make it', putting on a brave and happy face and excitedly and eagerly making new fun will turn the whole mood of the home around. This can be an awesome season. We have our families to celebrate. We have our health to celebrate. We have many blessings, and these require our attention too!

One thing that strikes me about 2020 is how incredibly resilient our kids have been. They are rolling with the punches and adapting to the current norm with ease. We can learn something from them. Resilience is about bouncing back from challenges, and this is a huge life lesson for all of us. Don't underestimate how strong and wise and resilient you are too. #YouGotThis.

#YouGotThis



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