

Ten Tips for a Peaceful Holiday Season: Helping Kids Relax

From Patti Teel

Kids get pretty anxious over the holidays. It's a time of excitement and wonder, and they often have a hard time relaxing, staying calm and sleeping well. Here are some tips to help your kids stay relaxed and on a healthy sleep schedule.

1. Don't overschedule your children. Cut back on the tasks and activities which are likely to overwhelm them. For example, avoid long trips to the mall with young children; short spurts of shopping will be more fun for everyone. Don't try to change your child's temperament; accept that he or she may be naturally timid and soft-spoken, or boisterous and loud. An activity level that might be comfortable for one child could be overwhelming for another—even in the same family.

2. Have activity-based celebrations. For instance, spend time with children making cards, decorations, cookies and gifts. You may wish to let each child select one activity for the whole family to do over the holidays.

3. Have children stay physically active. Don't allow busy holiday schedules to crowd out active play time. Physical activity is one of the simplest and most effective ways to reduce stress and ensure that a child gets a good night's sleep. Children should have at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity every day. (However, vigorous activities should not be done within several hours of bedtime because it raises the metabolic rate and may make it difficult for your child to relax.)

4. When possible, have your children play outdoors. Exposure to daytime sunlight helps children to sleep better at night.

5. Teach your children relaxation skills such as stretching, progressive relaxation, deep breathing and guided visualization. Relaxation can be a delightful form of play and it's easy to incorporate the holidays in imaginative ways. For example, play a relaxing game of "Santa Says." Direct children to stretch and relax by curling up like a snowball, to move their arms and legs slowly in and out like a snow angel, or to open their mouths widely to catch snowflakes.

6. Banish bedtime fears and help kids put worries to bed. Make a ceremony out of putting worries or fears away for the night. Have children pretend, or actually draw a picture of what's bothering them. Fold, (or pretend to fold) the worry or fear until it's smaller and smaller. Then put it away in a box and lock it with a key. It's often helpful for older children and teens to list their worries in a journal before putting them away for the night.

7. Make your home a sanctuary from the overstimulation of the outside world by making family "quiet time" a part of every evening.

- Limit total screen time, including computer games, video games and time spent watching television. Advertisements scandalously target children and the more they watch, the more they soak up the commercial messages of the season...instead of the real spirit of the holidays.
- Tell or read inspiring holiday stories.
- Sing and listen to soothing holiday music.
- Give each other a gentle massage.

8. Maintain the bedtime routine. While routines are likely to be thrown off during the holidays, it's important to maintain a consistent bedtime, allowing plenty of time for a relaxed bedtime routine. Don't let holiday parties or activities interfere with your child getting a good night's sleep.

9. Instill compassion and encourage generosity.

- Provide opportunities for your children to help others. Opportunities abound: have your child draw pictures and help bake and deliver food, encourage them to donate some of their clothes, toys or books; or regularly visit an elderly person who needs companionship.
- Read or tell stories that emphasize giving.
- Perform simple rituals to symbolize your care for others. Light a candle as you and your children send your good wishes or say a prayer for those who are in need.

10. Instill appreciation and gratitude. It's not possible to be upset and worried while feeling appreciative. Share good things that happened during your day and have your child do the same. They don't need to be major events; emphasize actions that demonstrate the blessings of the season. It could be a hug, words of love, the sound of the birds in the morning or a beautiful snowfall. Depending on your beliefs, you may wish to incorporate prayers of appreciation and thankfulness.