



## THE FAMILY TREE

# Surviving the holiday hustle

## Practical steps to keep the family holiday experience merry

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Sure, the holidays are a time to celebrate family and the joy of giving, but they are also a time of major stress for many parents. With shopping, baking, decorating, wrapping, party-going, volunteering, cooking and more, parents can feel overwhelmed.

Bend resident Petra Kaiser found a way to cut out the stress of her holiday this year. Kaiser's answer? She and her family are leaving the country. They will celebrate Christmas in Kaiser's native Switzerland.

"This year I took the stress away," said Kaiser.

Reducing the intense holiday hubbub is one of the benefits of the trip, according to Kaiser. She doesn't plan to give her daughters, ages 13 and 10, any presents other than the two-week trip to Switzerland. That means no worries about shopping, decorating, wrapping or making food.

Other than leaving the country, Kaiser says she doesn't know how to cut back on stress. She thinks traditions are important but believes all the tasks are just "too much."

"The stress is horrible, usually," said Kaiser. "It's getting worse every year."

While leaving the country is one way, albeit a bit extreme, to avoid stress this time of year, families can also find methods that don't require passports to make the holidays more manageable.

Why all the stress?

Claire Wheeler, a doctor, stress management consultant and author based in Portland, blames peer pressure for causing a majority of holiday stress.

“It’s like mass delusion,” said Wheeler. She says people work to re-create idyllic, and often inaccurate, memories from their own childhoods.

Amy Nobile, co-author of “I Was a Really Good Mom Before I Had Kids,” blames high expectations. She says many moms end up “trying to do it all and trying to do it all perfect.”

She suggests a simple test to see if you are taking on too much. “When you think of the holidays coming up, how does it make you feel?”

Negative thoughts are a pretty good sign parents are overstressed.

Wheeler says most people don’t want to focus on presents and shopping but seem to slip into that pattern.

“A lot of people feel guilty about focusing on commercialism, but it’s embarrassing to skip it,” said Wheeler. Few parents feel comfortable not getting a Christmas tree or hanging lights, for instance.

Wheeler believes the winter weather contributes to the difficulties. Wheeler says winter is actually the best time of year to be more quiet.

Instead, people feel forced into doing more. People lose track of their exercise regimen and indulge in too many fatty foods and alcohol. Combined with the shorter days and cold and flu season, people can wind up anxious, depressed and worn down.

“It seems like it wouldn’t be so bad if (Christmas) were in July,” said Wheeler.

Women tend to worry more than men, according to Wheeler. If men stress, it tends to be about money, whereas women worry about organizing events and “take more responsibility for everybody’s emotional well-being,” said Wheeler.

Herb Mandell, the national medical director for KidsPeace, says people often crash after the holidays in part because of heightened expectations.

People think the holidays will make them feel happy with renewed vigor, but instead they are left with a sense of emptiness.

Mandell says many people end up feeling uneasy, exhausted and disappointed in January.

“They just didn’t get what they wanted,” said Mandell, and not just in terms of presents.

Starting in fall, Mandell says, the holidays follow one after another, so people feel they can push serious issues aside and delay dealing with them.

Then, after Christmas, he says “it comes time to pay the piper.”

## Money and kids

One big stressor is money. Mandell says this year could be particularly challenging to parents because of the downturn in the economy.

Bend mom Erin Jackson says finances are her biggest stress during Christmas. She has three children and “trying to make ends meet” can be tough during the holidays.

This year she doesn’t feel she has time to hang lights and she didn’t take part in decorating the tree.

“I used to be really into it,” said Jackson. But financial issues have made her less enthusiastic about it. Last year, she says, everything they had was given to them.

“It’s super important for people who are well off to understand there are people that are not,” said Jackson. “I know a ton of families that are struggling financially. One family is going to just forget about Christmas.”

Holiday stress also impacts kids, and parents’ stress can transfer to children.

“Our kids are watching us. They see us stressing about unnecessary things,” said Nobile. “We don’t want to associate holidays with stress.”

Wheeler says when kids get the time off from school, they “really need a break.”

“They don’t need a lot of elaborate goings on,” said Wheeler.

Parents need to act as an activity filter for children, according to Virginia Bentz, author of “Quick Guide to Good Kids.”

The littler they are, the more likely kids are to feel overwhelmed and get overexcited, according to Bentz.

Some kids, she says, get scared of Santa or end up not being able to sleep because they have been so hyped up.

“A little excitement goes a long way with children,” said Bentz.

Wheeler says parents should keep a look out for signs kids are overwhelmed, such as not doing well in school or not sleeping well.

Shaunti Feldhahn, co-author of “For Parents Only: Getting Inside the Head of Your Kid,” says the holidays are a common time for misunderstandings between parents and teenagers. She calls the holidays a “presser cooker that magnifies issues.”

Based on research of more than 1,200 teenagers, Feldhahn and her co-author found that teenagers crave freedom and are looking for ways to define themselves. This explains, she says, why so many teenagers push to get away from family traditions.

### Anxiety reduction

So what practical steps can parents take to make the holidays more fun and less stressful? The authors and doctors we talked to offered the following pointers:

- Moms should delegate. Wheeler says mothers, in particular, have a nasty habit of taking on all of the holiday tasks. She says they need to learn to delegate to husbands and kids. Not only will this help share the workload, it could also enhance the kids' enjoyment and give them a more realistic view of the holiday. "It doesn't all just happen magically, and mom ends up a mess," said Wheeler. Nobile agrees women often try to get everything done and just "suffer silently" or they expect their husbands to know what needs to be done without telling them. She says moms need to explain what kind of help they need because "guys are a little bit clueless."
- Reach out to others. Just as moms should try to involve their families in the holidays, they can also look to their larger network of friends, family and neighbors. Parents can trade child care to make running errands or shopping easier and kid-free. Or they can collaborate on making cookies, cutting down Christmas trees or shopping to make the endeavors more fun.
- Prioritize tasks. Wheeler suggests families sit down for a pre-holiday meeting. Write down everything you have done in years past. Then families should look over the list and talk about which items are the most important. Consider prioritizing three to five things and look to remove as many as possible.
- Focus on meaning. Families will get more out of the holidays if they focus on the deeper meaning, according to Wheeler. For Christian families, that may mean honoring the birth of Jesus. And all families who celebrate Christmas can focus on issues such as the power of giving and the importance of family. "If there's a sense of meaning, people do better," said Wheeler.
- Recognize when stress takes over. When parents feel stressed out, they need to take action to relieve some of that pressure. Wheeler offers several suggestions. Parents can focus on their breathing for a few minutes and try to clear their head. Parents can take a quick walk, even five or 10 minutes can make a difference. A 15-minute nap can also do wonders. All of these activities help change the brain's chemistry, according to Wheeler, and will leave parents feel a bit more refreshed and ready to take on the tasks at hand.
- Cut corners. If cooking isn't really your thing, consider ordering food from a restaurant or super market. Or buy a tree rather than cutting one in the woods (or skip a tree all together). Just because a family has done it one way in the past doesn't mean they have to continue that same pattern for perpetuity. Nobile, who bought most of her Thanksgiving meal, says many people avoid these short cuts because they are embarrassed. But the truth is, she says, no one else really cares.

- Avoid overeating or drinking. When the brain gets stressed out, it sends out signals for fat and sugar, according to Wheeler, which is why the holiday season can be so problematic for parents' waistlines. The best idea is to plan indulgences and make a morning-after plan, according to Wheeler. Mandell says weight gain over the holidays is one of the reasons for the increase in depression afterwards. And weight gain can impact kids mental health as well, he says.
- Let kids blow off steam. Kids, just like parents, need to burn the extra calories they are consuming. Parents should try to find ways for kids to play and exercise, even if little ones are in their party clothes.
- Make a budget and stick to it. Money is a major source of holiday stress. Sitting down and making a reasonable holiday budget is a good way to rein in spending.
- Don't worry about disappointing kids. Children understand more than some parents give them credit for, according to several experts. Wheeler says parents who are feeling financially strapped should convey that to their children. In fact, Mandell suggests this actually teaches kids an important lesson. "You teach kids that things don't universally get better all the time. That's not the way the world works," said Mandell. Parents shouldn't mention worries about losing the house or a job, but they can tell children money is tight this year and Christmas will be more modest. "It really truly does not matter if you get them an Xbox," said Mandell.
- Prioritize performances. Kids' concerts, plays and performances are must-attend events for parents, according to Bentz. But everything else is optional.
- Enjoy the events and tasks you do take on. This can be easier said than done, but it is essential. For instance, if your family has prioritized baking holiday cookies, Bentz says parents should really try to savor this activity and involve kids. Be willing to spend half a day or more on a task, if it is something that is important.
- Think about the number of gifts. Bentz suggests parents put a cap of four to six presents per child. She also believes each present should be opened one at a time, with time allotted so kids can say thank you. "It builds up the pleasure of receiving and giving," said Bentz.
- Consider brand-name requests. Feldhahn says teenagers asking for brand name items may not be just greedy, as many adults assume. She says they are often trying to find their own identity. She suggests parents ask their teens why they want such an item and whether they are willing to sacrifice other presents to have the one item they really want.
- Prioritize quiet time. Bentz emphasizes the importance of calm family time. Kids and parents both need the time to relax and reflect.
- Set expectations for older children. Teenagers are more likely than little kids to question family obligations and traditions and seek their own activities, according to Feldhahn. She suggests parents sit down with their older children and talk about a few priority events the entire family is expected to attend. If teens want to skip some of the non-prioritized events, Feldhahn says,

parents should think about letting them. She suggests parents do not take it personally when teenagers express interest in doing other things.

- Allot extra travel time. Traveling during the holidays can be one of the most stressful activities. Mandell suggests parents give themselves extra time to get where they need to go. Often, he says, parents don't think to schedule flights based on their children's sleep patterns, but this can make a huge difference and can be worth any extra cost.

- As much as possible, stick to a schedule. Especially for younger children, sticking to a schedule can be critical to their comfort level. Mandell says kids can become irritable, fussy and "potentially miserable" if they are asked to take on a whole new routine during the holidays.