

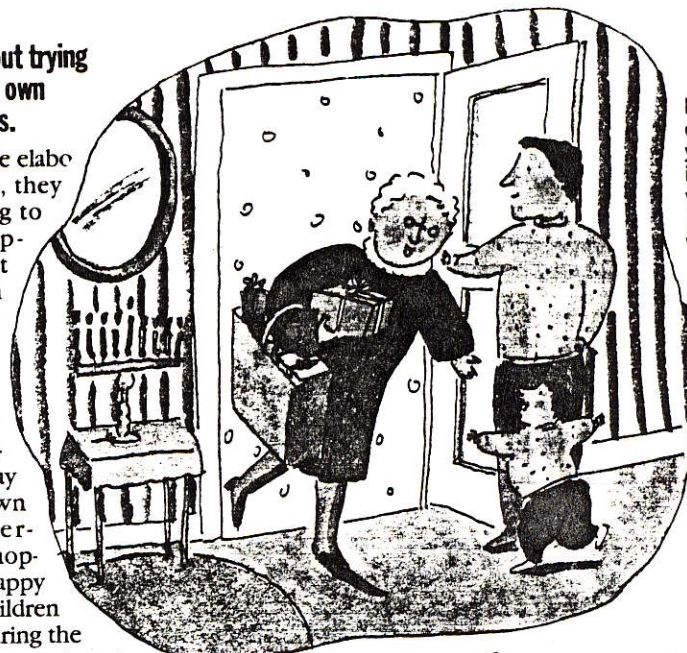
everything that's special about the holidays," she says, "but sometimes it's just too much." Parents may become angry with an "ungrateful" toddler who grows restless after 20 minutes in a theater. This situation can be avoided, however, if parents choose events that fit the child's age and personality. For an active child, a half-hour puppet show may be more appropriate—and more enjoyable—than a full-length performance of *The Messiah*.

## 2 Keep social obligations to a minimum.

We like to think of the holidays as a "family time," points out Virginia Burlingame, Ph.D., a therapist in Racine, Wisconsin. She warns, however, that too many obligations get in the way of a happy, relaxed experience. Instead of accepting every invitation that comes your way, try to choose a few special parties or events, and leave time for quiet evenings at home. If Christmas Day is becoming overloaded, try spreading out visits with friends and family. Otherwise, young children may become exhausted and anxious, and the day will be less enjoyable for everyone.

## 3 Be careful about trying to recast your own childhood memories.

When parents make elaborate holiday plans, they may also be trying to "undo" the disappointments that cloud their own holiday memories. For example, a father whose parents used to argue bitterly each year over which Christmas tree to buy may now—with his own family—be determined to make shopping for a tree a happy event. But if his children become cranky during the lengthy expedition to a tree farm and lose interest, the father may get angry, believing that his efforts are not being appreciated. Michael Maloney, M.D., the director of Child Psychiatry and Psychology Services at Children's Hospital Medical Center, in Cincinnati, urges parents to keep things in perspective and say to themselves, "Okay, I tried, but this particular situation didn't work out. That doesn't mean the whole holiday is ruined."



It's often easier on young kids if relatives visit them (not vice versa).

## 4 Don't overpromise on projects or activities.

Susie Toth, a mother from Carlisle, Massachusetts, keeps mum on major projects that she plans to do with her four children. "I've learned not to tell them ahead of time," she says. That way, if someone becomes ill, or if she simply runs out of time, the children aren't disappointed. Many parents grow annoyed with an eager child's nagging. ("Please can we make the gingerbread house today, Mommy?") It's better to wait until the *day* of the project to announce it—after you've gathered everything you need.

## 5 Rely on shopping shortcuts.

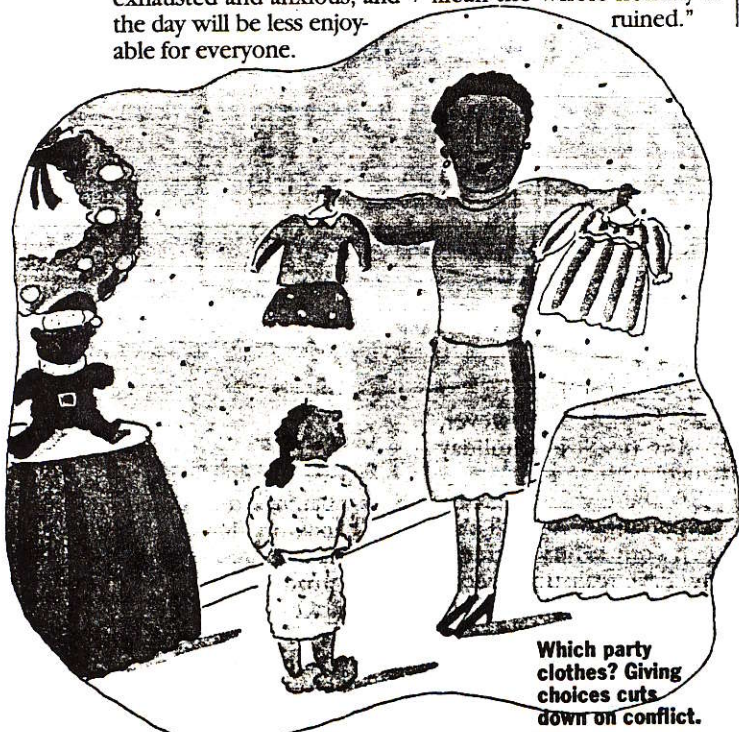
Liz Mumford, an artist and mother living in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, finds herself busy filling orders for her Cape Cod paintings during the holidays, and this leaves her with less time for her own personal shopping. Mail-order catalogs allow her to choose last-minute gifts and avoid the wear and tear of department-store crowds. For an additional fee, many catalog companies will wrap gifts, another time-saver for overcommitted parents.

## 6 Prepare your children for your holiday plans.

If getting ready to go to Grandma's means dragging happy children away from new toys, parents can expect more opposition than usual. As a rule, young children do better when they know what to expect. If you plan to go visiting shortly after opening gifts, warn your children ahead of time that in an hour, everyone will have to get dressed. (Since your car trip may take longer than usual because of holiday traffic, let each child choose an activity or game to bring along, and be sure to have extra snacks on hand.) Children should also be told in advance of any changes in your usual routine. You can avoid a major disappointment by explaining that the cousins who usually come to stay just had a new baby, and they won't be able to visit.

## 7 Let the relatives come to you.

Kendra Sutherland, of Dallas, has an 18-month old son, and she and her husband spent the holidays last year shuttling between two sets of adoring grandparents. "As a result," she says with some disappointment, "we didn't



Which party clothes? Giving choices cuts down on conflict.