

Your Family

(Continued)

get to spend the holidays in our new home with our new baby." This year she wants her son to have the experience of waking up at home on Christmas morning, so the grandparents will be coming to them.

Visiting is never entirely relaxing for a young family. At holiday time it can also mean cautioning young children

to keep away from candles or fragile tree ornaments. Such rules and restrictions can set even the most cooperative child on edge. For this reason, many parents find it easier to stay at home and act as host.

8 Be sensitive to a young child's needs.

The excitement of the holiday season can take a toll on young and old alike. Some-

times, notes Michael Maloney, "children get parked in front of the television" while their parents prepare a gourmet dinner for 12. But when youngsters need attention, they will act up—perhaps right in the middle of that dinner party. "Children are revved up and anxious, so they need more listening time from parents," he explains. Take a break from your preparations to sit down and draw pictures

with your kids or spend a few extra minutes with them at bedtime. If your child is going to the home of a relative he doesn't know, you can relieve some of the stress by talking about the visit ahead of time and letting him know to expect some unfamiliar rituals or ways of doing things.

9 Entertain as simply as possible.

Liz Mumford finds that as her 6-year-old son grows, so does the circle of friends and relations who come to the family's annual holiday party. "I finally got smart," says Liz, "and asked everyone that was coming to bring some food." Preparing for the potluck event can be done with a minimum of stress, and best of all, Liz now enjoys herself more. If you plan to cook, choose dishes that can be prepared and frozen ahead of time. The more time you can devote to your family beforehand, the more agreeable your children will be once company arrives.

10 Let young children help choose their holiday outfits.

You can cut down on conflicts over clothing by giving your children a say in what they wear, especially if you expect your family to dress up. A 3-year-old may assume that his favorite stained T-shirt and jeans are perfectly appropriate for turkey dinner with the extended family. Just imagine his distress at being handed the stiff new suit and tie that you picked out! And ask your daughter ahead of time whether she would prefer to wear a dress or a skirt, and then let her choose the color. If your son always wears sneakers, perhaps you can agree to let him change into them later from more formal shoes in the day. By meeting your children halfway, you make it easier for them to do the same.

11 Explore the real meaning of the holidays with your kids.

Be sure to set aside some quiet moments for reflecting on what the holiday you celebrate is really all about. (Don't assume that your children already know.) The school librarian can recommend some age-appropriate books and stories about Hanukkah or Christmas. Another idea is to plan at least one event that puts the emphasis on giving, not receiving. Many families donate clothes to a local homeless shelter or cook a meal together to deliver to a soup kitchen. In this way, children as young as 4 or 5 can begin to appreciate what it means to help others.

12 Be flexible about family traditions.

Don't try too hard to replicate rituals from your own childhood. Some parents find that the most meaningful and enduring traditions are those they begin themselves, often quite by chance. Several years ago, a car accident left Susie Toth with a badly injured back and shoulder. While recovering during the holidays, she spent less time in the kitchen and more time enjoying her children's company. In the days leading up to Christmas, members of her family also took turns reading aloud to one another from holiday books, a lovely tradition that they have enjoyed every year since. Today Susie continues to avoid excessive outside commitments. "I'm learning—finally—to let go of words like 'should,'" she says of the more recent, relaxed holidays with her husband and children. "We've just slowed it all down." □

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