



Clearinghouse on Supervised Visitation

The Institute for Family Violence Studies

Florida State University

DECEMBER EPRESS

QUESTIONS FROM DIRECTORS

We would like to share our forms and policies with other programs, and in turn, have a chance to see others' policies and forms. Can you help coordinate this?

I have not had any recent requests from others to participate in such an exchange, but I am happy to put your name and email address here and invite other directors to share with you. Directors: Please feel free to email Mark Roseman at mark.roseman@thetobycenter.org

We have a father who brings gifts for his children every visit, but we notice that one child receives the most generous gifts compared to her siblings. What should we do?

Gift-giving at visits can be a thorny issue. The holidays do bring out such issues, and they are worth thinking about. It would be perfectly acceptable for a child who is having a birthday to get a larger gift than the other children in the family. However, if a parent seems to be openly favoring one child, that behavior is worth a conversation with the parent. Talk to the parent about how the other children feel, and how the program can not participate in such favoritism. Screen the gifts before visits from now on --not just for safety, but for appropriateness and favoritism-- so that you have more control over what is given to the children. You have the discretion to refuse to allow gifts to be given to the children, so please use your discretion to educate parents and protect children. There is always a chance that a parent does not realize what they are doing, so use these moments as a coaching opportunity. Remember to document your interaction with the parent, their responses, and how you proceed. Also, please do make a note of this to the case manager, and keep her in the loop.

Coping with Holiday Stress and Sadness

By Samantha Matras

Introduction

Although the holiday season is largely associated with joyous family gatherings, they also tend to involve social and financial demands that can lead to enormous amounts of stress for the entire family. Cleaning, cooking, baking, social gatherings with extended family, high expectations, and of course gift giving are just a few sources of stress.

Planning for the holidays can lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and even depression, especially when the demands of the holidays are added onto existing responsibilities, oftentimes conflicting with them. As such, it is vital to recognize stressors in advance, organize time, and prioritize goals effectively in order to cope with the holiday season. Preemptive planning and reflection can help to minimize some of this stress.

Objectives

This E-press will address:

- Common holiday stressors
- Tips that can be offered to prevent and manage holiday stress and depression

How can parents prevent holiday stress?



One way to minimize stress is by reflecting on the expectations of the holiday season. Asking, “Are my expectations for the holidays realistic?” is an important first step to minimizing holiday stress.

Social service providers can encourage parents to make lists of what they expect from themselves and family members during the holidays. This way, they are able to recognize potential threats to these expectations or triggers and explore

ways to defuse or minimize them. Parents can also strive to identify goals and expectations that are unrealistic. For instance, “All members of the family will be cheerful,” is an unrealistic expectation. No matter how great the holiday cake tastes, someone may still be unhappy for unrelated reasons.

Below are a few potential stressors and ways to minimize them:

Stressor: Holiday shopping

Ways to minimize stress:

- Ask family members in advance about what they would like to receive.
- Shop early to ensure a larger selection.
- Create a budget and stick to it.

Stressor: Family Gatherings

Ways to minimize stress:

- Have a potluck instead of having the host cook everything.
- Buy prepared food instead of making everything “from scratch.”
- Prepare and freeze food ahead of time.

Below is a list of tips to help parents defuse common holiday stressors. Parents may refer to this list when considering their own expectations and stress triggers.

- 1) **Be realistic.** As previously mentioned, expecting perfection can be extremely detrimental. Families may grow and change and consequently traditions may also change. Expecting traditions to stay the same over time can lead to disappointment. Family members can choose which traditions to maintain while remaining open to creating new ones.



- 2) **Stick to a budget.** Prior to holiday shopping, individuals can determine how much they can afford to spend and set spending limits for individual gifts. If budgets are tight, creative alternatives can be explored in lieu of expensive gifts. These may include handmade gifts, donating to a charity in someone’s name, or starting a family gift exchange.

- 3) **Avoid making gift promises.** Children often also have certain expectations for the holidays and may actually compare the gifts they receive to those of their peers. In order to decrease disappointment or jealousy, parents can refrain from promising children expensive gifts. They can also inform children ahead of time that something they ask for may be too expensive or that they may not receive every gift they wish for.

- 4) **Plan ahead.** Parents can manage their time by setting aside specific days for shopping, baking, and family visits. It may also be helpful to make gift and food lists to help prevent last-minute scrambling. It may also be beneficial to assign holiday tasks or event cleanup to people ahead of time, though it is important to remain flexible if things do not go according to plan.



- 5) **Learn to say no.** Stress levels also tend to increase when a person overcommits.

Saying yes to doing or attending too many things can lead to resentment or

feeling overwhelmed. Holiday stress affects many families so if it is not possible to attend a particular event, friends and family members will most likely understand. If an individual fears upsetting a certain friend or family member by not participating in an event, they can explain why she or he cannot participate and offer to get together after the holidays.

- 6) **Set aside differences.** Family members may have to set aside grievances until after the holiday season. Individuals can try to accept family members and friends as they are in order to minimize holiday stress. If things do go awry or family members get upset, it is important to remember they too may be experiencing feelings of holiday stress.

Loneliness, sadness, and the holidays

Although the holidays connote feelings of warmth and family closeness, for some, the holiday season can magnify loneliness and sadness when juxtaposed to expectations of joy.

Factors that may contribute to holiday depression include:

- Associating the holiday season with unresolved family issues or a painful childhood
- Facing the loss of a loved one with whom holidays were formerly shared
- Facing the expectation that one “should” feel happy
- Spending the holidays away from friends or family
- Feeling isolated from others
- Comparing friendships and family relations to other people’s relationships or societal projections of those relationships
- Navigating changes in family structure and accompanying changes in traditions
- Reflecting on losses or disappointments over the past year
- Being surrounded by copious amounts of food and alcohol if one is trying to decrease their intake

Below are ways parents and individuals can strive to cope with feelings of loneliness and depression:

- **Volunteer:** If a person is feeling isolated, she or he can volunteer to help others. Spending time with people in need can help decrease loneliness and increase self-worth.
- **Try something new:** If a person is struggling with loneliness or grieving the loss of a loved one, she or he can try doing something new, such as taking a vacation with a friend or family member, or starting a new holiday tradition.
- **Acknowledge your feelings:** Individuals can try to accept feelings of sadness or loneliness, as pushing those feelings aside may lead to greater feelings of isolation.
- **Spend time together:** If someone is suffering from the loss of a loved, she or he can spend time with other close friends or family members or with others who may be coping with similar feelings. Other family members or friends may be

feeling lonely as well and relying on each other for emotional support can be a better alternative to isolating oneself.

- **Reflect on what the holiday means to you:** If a person is religious, it might be beneficial to reflect on the spiritual significance of the holidays when they are feeling lonely or depressed.
- **Expect the unexpected:** Experiencing unexpected changes can trigger feelings of sadness. As such, it may help to discuss how traditions or holiday plans may be altered due to changes in family structure, that way everyone can anticipate and prepare for those changes.
- **Reach Out:** If needed, individuals should be encouraged to reach out for help (everyone needs a helping hand from time to time).

Conclusion

Many people have high expectations for the holidays and trying to meet those expectations can be extremely stressful. For individuals who may be grieving a family member loss or do not have close family relationships, the holiday season can emphasize those realities and lead sadness and loneliness versus warmth and joy. However, there are ways parents can try to minimize holiday stress and sadness such as recognizing unrealistic expectations, planning ahead of time, or volunteering to spend time with people in need.



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Winter Tree Finger Painting

Supplies:

- Sheet of blue paper
- White paint/finger-paint
- Black marker
- Q-tip



Directions:

1. Have child use the black marker to draw a tree
2. Have child dip fingers and/or Q-tip in paint, and dab paint onto tree branches, on ground, and anywhere else they like to make snow

Managing Holiday Stress and Transitions

Let go of former expectations. Expecting perfection or expecting everything will stay the same can lead to disappointment. Instead, try to have realistic expectations and accept that things will be different.

Be open to new traditions. Have an open conversation with your children and other family members about what traditions can be continued despite family changes, but remain open to the possibility of making new ones.



If you do not have close family ties, try spending time with friends. Think about something you would like to do around the holiday season, then invite someone to do it with you. If that doesn't work out, you could join a free community event or activity to meet new friends.

Utilize available resources. You do not have to manage transitions or grieve alone. Utilize family, religious institutions, or support groups instead of isolating yourself from loved ones or potential sources of support.

Practice self-care. Do not forget to take care of yourself. You cannot take care of others if you are not well yourself. Think about activities that help you de-stress such as taking a walk, taking a long bath, doing yoga, or simply remembering to take deep breathes periodically throughout the day.

Communicate and Coordinate. Discuss with family members how holiday plans may alter due to changes in family structure before the holidays, so everyone can anticipate and prepare for those changes and avoid triggering feelings of sadness.

Volunteer. Helping others can decrease loneliness and focus attention away from stress and towards helping other people. It's sure to lift your spirits!

Expect the unexpected. Replacing routines with the joy of the unexpected. Try saying to yourself, "If I accept that holidays are not predictable, then I can live in the joy of each moment as it unfolds." Parents can find holiday joy by being present.

The Benefits of Eating Dinner Together

By Elena Simonsen

Introduction

Given all the demands of everyday life, it can be difficult for families to find time to spend together. Parents may be busy with work, while children are busy with school and extracurricular activities. Situations like these make it difficult for family members to bond. Meal times provide an excellent opportunity for members of a family to reconnect. In fact, eating meals as a family has been shown to have a number of positive outcomes for children, not just in terms of physical health, but also in relation to emotional well-being.

Objectives

This article will address:

- How eating dinner as a family can be beneficial for children
- Ways that families can make the most of mealtimes together

The Benefits of Family Meals

Research has shown that eating meals as a family can have a number of positive outcomes for children. Specifically, children may reap benefits in the areas of physical health, emotional and psychological well-being, in addition to improved outcomes in school and learning.

Physical Health

Eating meals together as a family provides parents with an opportunity to model healthy eating patterns for children and has the following benefits:

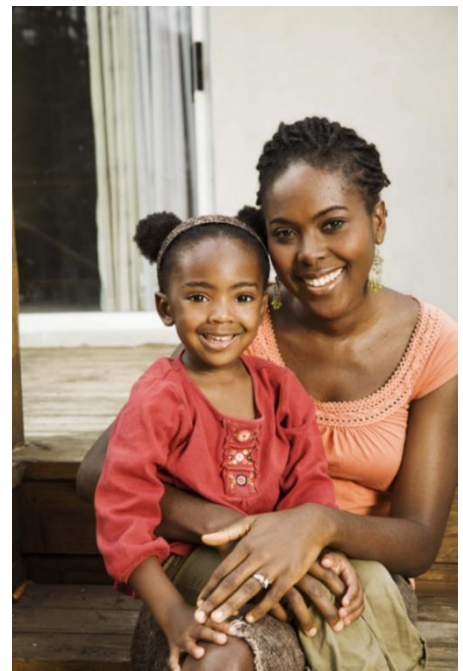


- Meals prepared in the home tend to be less caloric and fatty than meals consumed from a restaurant (especially from a fast-food restaurant).
- They will likely get more nutrients, such as protein and vitamins, in their diets.
- They are less likely to drink soda and eat fried foods than children who don't eat meals with their families.
- They are also less likely to be overweight or develop eating disorders.

Emotional and Psychological Benefits

Family meals have also been linked to a number of positive emotional and psychological benefits for children:

- Increasing feelings of closeness and comfort amongst family members
 - Dinner time is a great opportunity for parents to connect with their children, and share their experiences and other important information with them. It also allows children an opportunity to share their opinions and feel like they have a say in family matters.
 - Children say that they are most likely to talk with their parents at dinner time, creating a great opportunity for family members to share positive experiences with one other.
- Providing children with stability
 - Amidst all of the inconsistency in other areas of their lives (such as troubles at school, or perhaps being busy with extracurricular activities), it is good for children to be able to depend on spending time with their parents during mealtime
- Creating a sense of security and unity
 - Dinner can be a time where family members come together and share their feelings and experiences
- Enhancing self-esteem and motivation
 - When children know their parents are there to support them, they feel better about themselves
- Positively impacting children's development of values and identity
- Increasing children's respect for their parents and thus the likelihood that they will adhere to household rules
- Decreased depressive symptoms, substance use, sexual activity, smoking, and violence in teenagers



Benefits to Education and Learning

One study found that conversations held at the dinner table can expand children's vocabularies more than reading aloud to them. Children who have larger vocabularies learn to read at a younger age, and also have an easier time learning to read. Eating meals as a family has also been linked to higher grades in school and an increased likelihood of graduating from high school. Dinner conversations teach healthy communication and listening skills, provided that family members take turns speaking and listening to one another.

How to Make the Most Out of Meal Times

Given the benefits, parents and supervised visitation monitors may be interested to know what families can do to achieve them. Some suggested guidelines for families to follow during meal times include:

- Having meals together *at least 3 times per week*
 - A medium to high frequency of family meals has been shown to be most beneficial for children.
- *Cooking together*
 - Engages all members of the family in meal planning and preparation
 - *Have theme nights*
 - Families can try to be creative and create their own recipes together as well
- *Getting rid of distractions*
 - The TV should be off, and all cell phones should be put away
- Creating a *warm, engaged atmosphere*
 - This allows children to feel safe and encourages them to share their feelings and experiences
- Expressing *interest in the child's life*
 - Ask what he or she is doing in school, what's going on with friends, etc.
- Talking about *news and current events*
 - Educate children about what is going on in the world, and encourage them to think critically
- Giving *everyone a chance to talk*
 - Encourages turn-taking, promotes listening skills, and allows all family members to contribute
- Spending at least one hour *eating, talking, and cleaning up together*



Conclusion

Family meals provide a great opportunity for parents to connect with their children. Often times, dinner may be the only time of the day that family members are able to come together and talk about what is going on in each of their lives. The positive experiences that children *can* have during family meals have the potential to translate to other areas of their lives and even into adulthood. Thus, it is important for both parents and supervised visitation monitors to be informed as to how families can make the most of their meals together so that children can receive the most benefits.

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