


Holidays During the Pandemic

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As we head into the holidays, families everywhere are struggling to make plans appropriate for the pandemic. How do we celebrate when we can't be together as usual? How do we resolve differences of opinion about what is safe? How do we deal with more disappointment and frustration — and help our kids do the same?

We can't tell you what the right (or safe) choices are for your family, but here are some tips to make the best of holidays during the pandemic, whatever your situation. We asked our experts for advice about ways to minimize stress and help everyone in the family feel as good as possible about this unusual holiday season.

Don't wait to make plans

Discussions about this year's holidays can be painful, but making plans ahead of time will make the days themselves much less stressful. "I think some people are thinking, 'Let's play it by ear. We still have plenty of time before Christmas. Let's see how the COVID numbers look later,'" says Kenya Hameed, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. But, Dr. Hameed advises, it's better to work with the information we have now and plan accordingly. That gives everyone time to make good decisions and get comfortable with them, especially if they represent a big change in family traditions kids look forward to — like a shopping trip with grandma or a holiday party with friends.

"The more predictability we can create in this uncertain time, the better it is for kids," notes Grace Berman, LCSW, a social worker at the Child Mind Institute. "By making decisions early, you can really help them be prepared for what's going to happen." She suggests outlining for kids what Thanksgiving or Hanukkah or whatever you celebrate is going to look like this year, and then helping them cope ahead with it — work through feelings they might have and come up with strategies to feel better. If you wait until the last minute to figure out plans, kids won't have time to deal with any confusion or disappointment, which will make the holidays that much more stressful for the whole family.

Discuss rules in advance

Differences of opinion about how to gather safely may be a huge source of stress this holiday season. Safety measures for any kind of holiday gathering should be discussed clearly and decided in advance, advises Colin de Miranda, ASW, a social worker at the Child Mind Institute. "You need clear communication, maybe with everybody getting on a call beforehand and laying out who's comfortable with what," de Miranda says.

Will everyone be tested before coming? Where do we stand on hugging? What are our rules about masks? Avoid awkwardness and conflict (and unexpected risk to your family's safety) by making explicit agreements ahead of time with everyone who's going to be present. By setting those sorts of ground rules, Dr. Hameed adds, anyone who isn't comfortable with the arrangements has a chance to excuse themselves from participating.

Knowing that safety rules have been considered carefully is especially important if you have a child with a lot of anxiety around COVID, notes Berman. Whatever you decide to do, it's comforting for an anxious child to hear from you that the plan is a careful one: "We've thought about it and discussed it with everyone, and this is the decision we've come to. It's okay for you to feel anxious, and here are all the steps that we're taking to make sure that everyone can feel safe."

Stay the course

And what do you do when a guest who has agreed to a socially distanced visit comes in for the hug anyway? Time to refer to those ground rules. "You can say, 'Remember, we discussed this, and so as much as I want to hug you right now or as much as I want to be able to see your face without that mask on, I have to ask you to stick to the rules we set,'" says Dr. Hameed. It can also be helpful give kids a script to use if someone isn't respecting the rules: "My mom says I'm not allowed to give you a hug this year but we can wave!"