

The Family Gathering: A Survival Guide

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We know from the songs and movies that holidays are supposed to be an exciting, meaningful time for families to reunite and celebrate the things we cherish. We set aside time to practice both religious rituals and family traditions, we give thanks, and, of course, later on, we give presents. But sometimes holiday gatherings are less magical and more, well, stressful.

The vacation from school and work means a break from routine, something kids and parents alike depend on. Many families travel, facing traffic and long airplane rides, to attend one or more family get-togethers with rarely seen relatives who expect kisses and catching up. And most of these occasions will involve unfamiliar vegetable dishes.

How can anxious or easily frustrated children hope to survive all that? We've compiled a list of seasonal tips to help all kids—and parents—enjoy the party.

Minimize conflict over behavior

Your kids know the rules at your house, but in the excitement and novelty of a relative's home, good behavior can be a casualty. Always have a conversation before leaving your house about how you expect your children to behave, and don't shy away from specifics.

“Knowing what the rules are at someone else's house is always helpful for kids,” says Steven Dickstein, MD. “They know that you behave differently in church or synagogue than you do on the basketball court; they need to know what the rules are at grandma's house.” If you have any questions about the house rules, don't be afraid to ask.

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Talk to your hosts early

Besides preparing your children, sometimes it's necessary to prepare your relatives so they know what to expect. “A child who has behavior difficulties at school is going to have them at grandma's house,” warns Dr. Dickstein, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, “so make sure their expectations are realistic. As a parent you never want to put your children in a situation where they're set up to fail.”

Dr. Dickstein also recommends putting a moratorium on criticizing. “Warn family members about sensitive topics in the same way you'd warn people in advance that your child has a nut allergy,” advises Dr. Dickstein. If you have a body-conscious teen, no one should chide her for taking seconds on mashed potatoes. If your brother doesn't believe ADHD is real, now isn't the time to discuss it.

Plan ahead for some peace and quiet

For kids who are easily overstimulated or sensitive to things like noise and crowds, Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends arranging for another room they can use when they need a break. “During family gatherings we want to achieve a balance between being social with relatives while also knowing that, if things get too overwhelming and intense, there’s a place to take a break and just be quiet.”

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Keep kids occupied

Kids like structured activities, and they’ll probably be missing them while school is out. Fortunately the holidays lend themselves to art projects and family-friendly movies that kids enjoy. You can even start new family traditions like cutting out and decorating sugar cookies or throwing a ball around outside.

If you are traveling with a child who will need to sit in a car for any length of time, Dr. Busman advises packing a bag with multiple activities, particularly if the child has a lot of energy. “Don’t just think four or five activities will be enough because you could be through those things before you even get on the highway,” she says.

When traveling Dr. Busman also recommends planning for breaks, even if it’s not that long of a trip. “Kids who get restless or have difficulty managing their impulsive behavior might really benefit from getting out of the car and running around for a few minutes.”

Discuss social expectations

Parents should have different social expectations for different kids, and if necessary communicate them to your extended family. “You want to avoid those mandatory hugs and kisses or cheek-pinching for kids that don’t do that or like it,” says Dr. Dickstein.

Kids with selective mutism should not be pressured to talk during family gatherings (and relatives shouldn’t expect them to talk either). If you have an autistic child who has been working on his social skills, maybe you can agree that he will sit at the table next to you and talk to familiar people—others should be expected to understand.

Getting along with cousins and other kids they don't see often can be a challenge. Just because kids are approximately the same age doesn't mean they'll be natural friends, but they should still try to get along—with adult support if needed. If your daughter gets easily frustrated when she doesn't get her way, encourage her to share and be polite with her cousins—and let her know she should find you if conflict arises that they can't settle amicably.

Dr. Dickstein says family gatherings can be a teachable moment. “Let kids know that family is important and sometimes you have to deal with people you don't really like, but you should work it out, if you can. As parents you are probably doing that with your relatives too, so you can model good social behavior.”

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Think about the menu

Family gatherings centered on a meal can put a lot of pressure on kids who are picky eaters or who have sensory issues that limit their diet. If you are going to someone else's house for dinner and you know the menu will be a problem, Dr. Busman suggests packing something your child will eat and bringing it with you.

Have a conversation with your child ahead of time to reassure them, explaining, “I know we're going over to your aunt's house and there's going to be some different foods there, but we'll make sure that we bring some things that you like. It would be great if you could try something else, too.” Exploring new foods is good for kids, but it shouldn't be the most important thing.

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Manage your expectations

Both Dr. Busman and Dr. Dickstein agree that managing your own expectations of what the holidays “should” be like is the most essential step to any holiday gathering. “As parents we should check in with ourselves over what our own expectations are and *not* extend them to our kids,” says Dr. Busman. “It would be great if the kids could sit at the table and eat a nice holiday meal with us, but they're probably not going to want to sit still for a long time. It's important to appreciate that kids might find the fun in other things, like watching a movie with their cousins or running around outside. And that's ok.”

Dr. Dickstein advises identifying one or two things you would like your kids to get out of the holidays—an idea, a value, a memory of doing something special together as a family—and work on achieving that. “But above all, give yourself a break,” he says. “You can't make everyone happy, and perfect holidays are nonexistent. Think of all those Hollywood comedies about disastrous family gatherings. There's a reason why they're funny.”

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