



HAPPY HOLIDAYS AND OTHER URBAN MYTHS

By Robin Bolduc

As I write, the leaves on the trees are turning colors and the weather is turning cooler. My 8-year-old son has already been wearing his pirate costume for almost a month. Holiday decorations fill the shopping malls and catalogues are filling my mailbox. The holiday season is upon us again. Fond memories of cookies baking, colored lights, music and holiday gatherings fill my head. I remember the morning that all the kids opened their Christmas presents before they woke my husband and I up. They were so excited over their “gift” to us...they had let us sleep in! Then there was the year that I told my two daughters with developmental disabilities the “truth” about Santa. I heard them exclaim, while watching the Macy’s Thanksgiving parade, “He IS real!” After that, I decided to live with the magic of believing for as long as they wanted.

I’m brought back to the present as my son starts to bounce around the house. Every trip to the store becomes a battle of the wills regarding holiday decorations and new toys. My adult children begin the annual tug-of-war over who will come with whom to whose house on which holiday! I remember the time that my adult daughter with Down Syndrome started crying hysterically because I wouldn’t let her sit on Santa’s lap at 20 years old. Holiday shoppers glared at me as I slunk away.



There was the time that my youngest son, who has obsessive compulsive disorder, stood in line to see Santa. He loudly announced, “That is not the REAL Santa, he’s wearing the wrong color pants.” The younger kids in line started to cry as I again slunk away! Let’s not forget the memorable Christmas Eve spent in the state psychiatric hospital. There is nothing so “merry” as opening your presents under the watchful and disapproving eye of Nurse Ratchet! I swore after that year that we could pretend that the holidays didn’t exist. Take all

the money spent on the holidays and have a nice vacation on an island that had never heard of holiday traditions... without children or assorted relatives of course.

Picture this: a blended family of step-children, former spouses, assorted present and former grandparents, aunts and uncles, foster and adopted children who bring with them assorted birth parents, birth grandparents and birth aunts, uncles and cousins, then add in friends who have become as close as any family member and parties related to employment and community work. You end up with a scheduling nightmare over the course about twelve weeks! Now add the factors that many of your children have special needs and “not so fond” memories of the holidays. Additionally, you have to entertain children through almost three weeks of no school. The ability of you and your family to deal with the “bustle” of the holiday season becomes stressed to its limits.

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So after 28 years of parenting nine children, I have finally come up with some wisdom on how to survive the holidays. Don't get me wrong . . . if you call in January, you will find me hidden under the covers recovering from the "Happy Holidays."

In "Holiday Stress Busters" Ann Svensen identifies five indicators that you need to "bust some stress":

- You're irritable.
- You're losing sleep.
- You're losing or gaining weight (this can be hard to tell around the holidays--it could just be all the good food).
- You feel tense--with muscle aches or headaches.
- You feel overwhelmed.

See yourself? Add that our children have lower tolerance to stress, require more care, require more patience and seem to absorb our own stress and you have an equation for a not-so-happy holiday season. So what can you do? Ann Vernon, a counseling professor at the University of Northern Iowa, has some words of advise for us:



- Start by lowering your expectations. Be more realistic about what you can do. This usually involves changing traditions — it can be equally as good, but it has to be unique to your family. My husband and I have a new holiday tradition. No one can come to our house for Christmas Eve. Instead, we put the children to bed early and have a romantic holiday dinner by candlelight. We watch “It’s a Wonderful Life” and go to bed with warm memories of a less complicated time.
- Take some time out, rethink what’s stressing you out, and look for alternatives. Change your demands to preferences: Tell yourself, “If I have time, I’ll do this and that. If not, I’ll only do that.” I used to stress out over making sure that the children bought and exchanged gifts with each other. Making sure that 7-9 children had 7-9 gifts for each other, paying for most of gifts for the younger children, nagging the older children to be “thoughtful” and wrapping so many gifts was a logistical nightmare. Now we play a Christmas game, taught to me by Christy Blakely. I buy enough small gifts for each person present on Christmas Day. We each pick a wrapped gift and sit in a circle. I read “The Night Before Christmas” and each person passes their gift to the right on the word “the.” The youngest child gets to open their gift first or exchange with another. There is much more fun and laughter and less stress than our original tradition.
- Be sure to “share” the fun! Delegate. Even the youngest child or the child with the most significant need should be given the opportunity to be a part of your tradition by giving of themselves.
- Don’t give in to the “gimmies.” It’s okay to tell your child that a gift is too expensive. Use traditions to make the holiday fun rather than adding financial stress to menu of stress issues.
- Be realistic about relatives and friends. They will not always understand the needs of your family with regard to your child’s disability. Be honest and clear about what you can and cannot do related to family gatherings and gift giving. Remember that you have to live with the consequences of too much over-stimulation and too many changes in your child’s schedule. Be an advocate for your child and yourself in these situations.
- Be realistic and sensitive to your child’s needs and plan accordingly. Hire a baby sitter to eliminate taking your child on all the extra shopping trips or holiday parties that might not be appropriate for him/her. Trade respite time with another parent in order to decorate or clean the house for company.

- Have a sense of humor. Remember that what may seem like a horror story to you now will find itself in the “book” of family memories as rather funny in a few years! Remember the time....

My own expertise and opinion is that the stressors that impact on “typical” children will be multiplied times ten when you add a disability to the mix. Do the best you can to utilize the tips of the experts and put a big red circle around the week the kids go back to school. Then give yourself an end-of-the-holiday gift of time – take a long hike, finish up the leftover chocolate, see an afternoon movie, spend a day in your pajamas reading a good book, or whatever makes you feel at peace and rested.

Have a truly happy holiday season!

Robin is a member of the Parent to Parent of Colorado. When not caring for her large and busy family, she is a contract grant writer.

Resources for Surviving the Holidays

Surviving the Holidays:

<http://specialchildren.about.com/od/holidays/a/holidayhelp.htm>

How to have a happy holiday with your child:

<http://www.idonline.org/article/11894>

Gluten Free Recipes:

<http://glutenfreemommy.com/recipes/>

<http://www.csaceliacs.org/recipes.php>

<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/holidays/recipes/glutenfree-dairyfree.php>

Special Health Concerns & Holiday Travel: For children with Asthma and allergies:

http://specialneedsparenting.suite101.com/article.cfm/special_needs_for_holiday_travel

Dealing with Family:

<http://specialchildren.about.com/od/inthecommunity/a/holiday.htm>

<http://betterkidcare.psu.edu/ParentsCount/ParentsCount0501.pdf>

For Grandparents of Children with Special Needs:

www.bellaonline.com/articles/art37114.asp

Less Materialistic Holiday:

http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/holidays_materialistic.html

Keep kids learning over break:

<http://specialchildren.about.com/od/learningissues/tp/learnvacation.htm>

Special Toys:

<http://www.toysrus.com/shop/index.jsp?categoryId=3261680>