

Time for a Happy, Healthy Holiday with Children

by

Sally Goldberg, Ph.D.

Q. What are important strategies for holiday success with children?

A. First and foremost, remember to keep up your healthy living patterns as much as possible. Next add holiday fun in natural and creative ways.

Amidst all the holiday goodies, gifts, and gatherings, it is easy to stray from what we know best about holiday happiness—that it comes from feeling good. From genuine healthy habits on the inside come the vim, vigor, and vitality of life on the outside. Nutrition planning, activity routines, and sleep schedules make up the basis for a smooth-running holiday season.

Nutrition Planning

Begin with a healthy eating plan. Remember that food is not a toy or a reward. It is best when shared at regular meal and snack times with people who are actively enjoying their time together. Instill in each child in your family an understanding of food as nourishment. Especially at holiday time it can be fun to encourage each person in your home to take on the challenge of eating as many nutritious foods as possible. Just as whole natural foods should be a part of daily life, so they can be used to enhance holiday celebrations. For a festive meal you can display fruit pieces in the shape of a holiday

wreath with green kiwi slices, red cherries, and other favorites that you choose. Children also enjoy making raisin faces on whole wheat bread or whole grain crackers spread with natural peanut or almond butter.

Activity Routines

Begin as soon as possible a family activity program. Design one that will work for each member of your family. Walking and bike riding are all-time favorites, but there are also other activities like ballet, gymnastics, sports, and the martial arts. You cannot beat 30 minutes a day of free time for everyone, inside or out.

Exercise for your baby is also important. Arm and hand stretches to the tune of *Open Shut Them* and moving your child's legs while singing *Daisy, Daisy* are popular with mothers and babies. For your preschooler there are many simple old standbys like *Simon Says* and *Red Light Green Light*. There are also circle games like *The Hokey Pokey* and *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush*. They all promote coordination and creativity. Start all circle games going in the clockwise direction. Play other games from left to right. These directions help to set up foundational learning patterns.

Older children can lead younger ones in uniquely designed treasure hunts and clever but safe obstacle courses. Lisa Kandell, MS, RD, IBCLC/RLC, Registered Dietitian/Pediatric specialist, reminds us that all activities do not have to be "conventional." They could be as simple as helping to bring in the groceries, playing an impromptu game of *Follow the Leader*, or doing family yoga. One of Lisa's favorites is

Freeze Dance. You can use a CD of your choice or just turn on the radio. Hit the mute button, and everyone will freeze.

Sleep Schedules

Having a bedtime for everyone is a must. Always include a winding down time as part of the routine, even an extra 15-20 minutes for the normal process of “falling asleep.” Once you get your family on an effective sleep cycle, many parts of life are likely to improve. Imagine no one being tired during the day! How about everyone being ready and more receptive to sleep at night! Proper sleeping habits can add more productivity and cooperation to your family life. Set up a routine for each member of your family, and then stick to it as much as possible all during the festive season.

Since the excitement of any celebration can throw off even the best of schedules, here is some holiday ingenuity. “A mint-scented bubble bath and/or the spice of candy cane toothpaste can add a unique kind of calming effect” says Julie Crichton, MD, author of the popular children’s books **The King and the Queen and the Jelly Bean** and **The Antelope Who Ate Cantaloupe**. She reminds us that the bedtime story can be about healthy eating. She also suggests ending a holiday bath by wrapping up your child up in a big blanket/towel. Her special touch is to “add a bow and let your child know that he/she is the best present you could ever have asked for.”

A sound mind in a sound body is a short but full description of a happy state in the world.

--John Locke

Happy holidays to you and your family! If you make health your priority this holiday season, happiness will be the gift you and your family will all receive.

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