

# Making Life Easier

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## Holidays: Strategies for Success

**W**hile the holiday season is filled with enjoyable activities, events and traditions, it can also be a hectic and stressful time. Travel, shopping, loud music, bright lights, unfamiliar food, and busy schedules can turn typical routines upside down! The disruption to routine can be particularly difficult for children who depend on routine and predictability to engage in appropriate behavior.

The following tips will help ensure that the holiday season is enjoyable for you and your child.



**Tip:** Prepare your child for changes.

Talk to your child about changes to the schedule and environment. Look at pictures from previous holidays and talk about what happened during those events. Also talk about this year's special programs and about behavior expectations, e.g., "we will sit and listen quietly during the presentation...when the program is over, we will go to the lobby and have some cookies and punch." Discuss upcoming trips several days before the departure date. Let your child know when you will be leaving, where you will be going, and what you will do while away. Repeat these conversations several times before traveling.

## **Tip:** Involve your child in preparations and minimize surprises.

If you are going to decorate the house or bake special goodies, involve your child and make the tasks fun! It could be upsetting for your child to come home from school to find the home looking very different with unfamiliar items and things out of place. Take decorations out gradually and allow your child to explore them so that she has time to adjust to the changes.



## **Tip:** Pace your holiday activities.

Busy holiday calendars can leave adults and children worn out and stressed. When possible, balance times of high activity with calm, relaxed times. Try to spread activities out over the holiday season.

★ **Keep aspects of your typical routine whenever possible.** Consistency and familiarity can help build coping skills for the unfamiliar. As much as possible, preserve bedtimes and other routines. Allow for a leisurely bath, story, song or cuddle. Eat meals together.

- ★ **Plan for a regular ‘Quiet Time’.** Try to build in time each day to provide your child with activities that she finds soothing or relaxing.
- ★ **Don’t shop ‘til you drop.** If your holiday season involves lots of shopping or errands, think carefully about how to involve your child. Stores will look and feel different this time of year as they are often extremely crowded and noisy. Children may become frightened or overwhelmed. Consider making trips brief, shopping at less crowded times, or leaving your child with another caregiver. If you have errands to run, limit the number of places you visit and let your child know that the errands will end at a fun place for her (e.g., a park, playground, ice cream store, etc.).

## **Tip:** Give clear directions.

Give your child a positive direction that assumes she will cooperate. For example, instead of saying “Amy, do you want to get on the plane?” it is better to say, “Oh look, it’s time to walk onto the plane. 1-2-3-4-5, Let’s go.” Remind her of expectations. For example, you might say, “Remember, walking feet on the plane.” It is also helpful to show your child the behavior using pictures or by modeling it yourself.

- ★ **Use Positive Words.** Clearly and simply state what you expect your child to do instead of what not to do. Encourage your child in a way that lets her know that she is exhibiting the desired behavior.
- ★ **Give warnings that change is coming.** Most young children need help transitioning from one activity to another, especially if they are engaged in an activity that they enjoy. Let your child know in advance that a change is coming. Give a few staggered warnings letting her know how much time is left in the current activity as well as what is coming up next. Help your child through the transition by talking to her or singing a song such as “The Clean-Up Song” or adapting a familiar song to the task.





★ **Use ‘Wait Time’.** A wait time of about 4 to 20 seconds is often all that is needed for a child to process and respond to a request.

★ **Provide choices, whenever possible.** Providing limited choices (two or three) for a child in a difficult situation can be a powerful strategy in preventing challenging behavior and redirecting a child to more acceptable behavior and cooperation. Choices help give children a sense of control over their surroundings and activities while still doing what needs to be done! Be sure that ALL the choices you offer are helping reach that goal! For example, if it is time to get dressed ask your child if she wants to get dressed by herself or with your help.

★ **Provide frequent and specific praise.** Let your child know when she is being cooperative and helpful by praising her specifically for what she is doing. For example, you might give your child a high five for sitting quietly in the car or you might say, “Thank you for holding my hand in the parking lot.”

★ **Empathize with your child’s feelings.** If your child cries, hits, bites, screams or hides, provide an emotional label for how she might be feeling and reassure her. Avoid punishment (e.g. “If you don’t sit still, I am going to spank you.”) and negative, and usually, untrue comments “Big girls don’t cry” or “There is nothing to be afraid of.” Let your child cry and comfort her by hugging, patting and/or using a soothing touch.

## **Tip:** Prepare family and friends.

**Inform family and friends of helpful strategies.** Talk to your family and friends about strategies that might help ensure your child’s success before spending time together. Consider specific aspects or situations that might have a negative impact on your child’s behavior (e.g., sensory issues, difficulty waiting, food allergies or sensitivities, etc.) and share strategies that have worked for you. Be sure to focus on your child’s strengths and strategies for success.



## **Tip:** Pack for success!



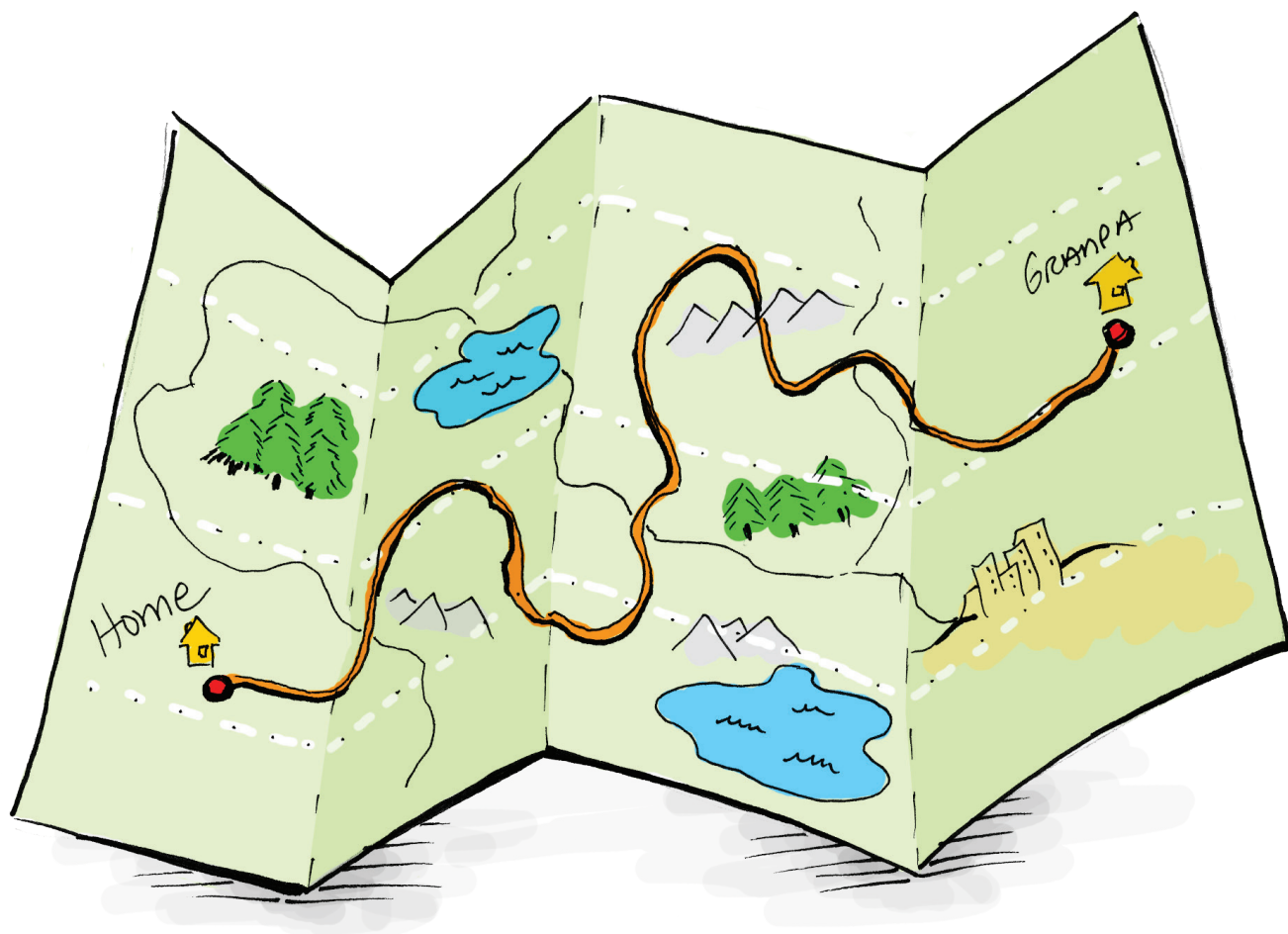
When your holiday plans include time away from home, bring familiar items, activities and foods with you. Pack activity bags that include favorite books, toys, and games. If possible, have your child help pack the bags so she can choose a few of the items herself. You might say, “Brianna, do you want to take Mickey Mouse or blankie in your bag?” This gives her a feeling of control and supports her growing sense of confidence and sense of competency.

For many families the holidays are a time of feasting and enjoying all kinds of yummy treats. Be attentive to diet changes and how they may affect your child. Chocolate, caffeine, sugar, and dairy products may have an impact of your child’s digestion, well-being, and behavior. If your child follows a particular diet, be sure to bring items with you that might not be available where you are going. Pack nutritious food and drink options to balance out sweet, holiday treats.

## **Tip:** Pre-travel planning.

★ **Reassure your child.** Let your child know that you will be with her and that she can take along a favorite toy or blanket. For example you might say, “Daddy will be with you” or “You can hold blankie on the plane.”

★ **Rest stops aren’t just for resting.** Familiarize yourself with your travel route as well as with parks and rest areas along the way. These offer great opportunities for children to run, jump, play with a ball, blow bubbles, and stretch. Many family-friendly restaurants and airports have play spaces also. A good rule is to take a ten minute break every two hours.



★ **Create a personal picture story about the trip.**

Create a small book with photos of the airport and plane or of the bus depot, bus, car or train. As you read the book with your child, let her know what will happen and how you expect her to behave. Read this to your child several times before the trip. Also, make sure to bring it along as a reminder. When children understand what is going to happen, they are less anxious which can increase cooperation and reduce challenging behavior.

**Tip:** Celebrate the successes along the way.

In closing, please remember that the team of professionals that support you and your child will have additional

specific ideas about how to help your child. Don't forget to ask them! Your child's speech and language therapist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, teacher, or other professional should be able to help you think about the best way to support your child over the holiday season. They are usually more than willing to help you make any needed specific supports (for example, a Travel Book, a Waiting Bag, a personal picture story, etc.). If your child is having persistent challenging behavior, you should ask the professionals who work with you to help develop a behavior support plan that will provide more specific strategies to prevent challenging behavior and help your child develop new social and communication skills.

# *Making Life Easier: Surviving and Enjoying the Holidays*

- ★ **Prepare your child for changes** in routines and schedule.
- ★ **Involve your child** in some of the holiday preparations.
- ★ Keep aspects of your **typical routine** whenever possible.
- ★ Give **clear directions**.
  - Use **positive words**.
  - Provide **transition warnings**.
  - Use **'Wait Time.'**
  - Provide limited **choices**.
  - Tell your child **how to behave**.
  - Provide **frequent and specific praise** for acceptable behavior.
- ★ **Empathize** with your child's feelings.
- ★ **Inform family** and friends of helpful strategies.
- ★ Be attentive to **your child's diet**.
- ★ Holiday Travel – **Plan ahead**
  - Pack a bag of **favorite items** to take with you.
  - Call airlines, airport or bus depot ahead about **special accommodations**.
  - **Visit the airport** or bus depot in advance.
  - Create a **personal story**.
- ★ **Celebrate** the successes along the way.