



**AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION**  
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# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Helping Children Cope with Holiday Stress Tips for Parents and Families**

**Arlington, Va.** – For most children, the holidays are happy, fun and exciting times. There is a break from school, and a chance to see friends and relatives. There may also be special food, music, and family traditions. However, for some children, the holidays can also be stressful and confusing. Family plans and celebrations may be complicated by divorce, separation or remarriage. The holidays can also be a difficult time for children who have lost a parent, sibling, or close relative. This year, many children are also separated from parents due to ongoing military service.

“The holidays often remind children of what’s changed and what’s now different,” says David Fassler, M.D., APA trustee-at large and a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Vermont. For example, he explains, “a child from a divorced family may feel sad on some level because he misses the ‘intact’ family he used to have. A child whose parent is on active military duty may feel it’s particularly unfair that her daddy or mommy needs to be away over the holidays.”

The following are some tips Dr. Fassler recommends for parents to help children cope with holiday stress:

1. Discuss holiday plans well in advance, and include your children in the planning process. Kids need some degree of control and predictability. Prolonged uncertainty, constantly changing plans or last minute decisions can all increase stress.
2. Make sure kids get plenty of rest. While it may be exciting to stay up late, lack of sleep often leads to increased irritability.
3. Limit the amount of time kids spend alone watching TV or playing video games. Encourage physical activity and interaction with peers.
4. Don’t promise things you can’t produce. For example, don’t promise a parent will be home in time for the holidays if the decision is really out of your control.
5. Don’t try and compensate for an absent family member with lots of gifts. What most kids really want is your time and attention.
6. Uphold and maintain family traditions even if a parent is absent. Kids count on certain traditions. They can have an important grounding effect by letting kids know that even though some things have changed, other things have remained the same.

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7. As the adult, take care of yourself. Try to avoid getting overloaded with obligations. If you feel stressed, it increases the pressure and tension on your children.

Most kids, even those dealing with loss or family transitions, can and do enjoy the holidays. However, preparation, patience and honesty can help prevent conflict, reduce stress, and enhance the holiday season for the whole family.

**The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose more than 36,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org).**

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