



## SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND TEENS DURING THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

The holiday season is upon us. Families are dealing with stress from multiple sources, including COVID-19, and may not be able to celebrate the holidays as usual. Although parents/caregivers may feel the need to do more to “make up” for such a difficult year, remember, more is not always better. Decide as a family how you will make each holiday special this year.

Given these changes, adults and children may experience waves of sadness, disappointment, loneliness, grief, and anger. It is important to not feel alone with these feelings, to have your feelings supported and validated by others, and to know that in the midst of these difficult times, you can create moments of joy, hope, and connection. While some traditions may have to shift due to these challenging times, this is also an opportunity to create new family traditions together.

### **STRATEGIES AND IDEAS FOR THIS HOLIDAY SEASON:** [Finding ways to make this year special](#)

#### ***Start a Family Conversation: Acknowledge What Has Changed and How Family Members are Feeling***

- Talk to your children/teens about this holiday season.
- Help them understand why things are different. You may want to share that you are doing things differently because you want to keep everyone safe and healthy.
- Let them talk about their feelings, what they are sad about, what makes them upset.
  - Let them know that they are not alone. You hear them.
  - Validate their feelings. It makes sense that they are feeling sad, disappointed, frustrated, angry . . . because the holidays are not the same, because they miss friends and family . . .
  - You may want to let them know that you are also sad and upset that so much has changed and that things are not the way you want them to be.
  - Even when you can't “fix” things, you are giving children the gift of your support.
- If loved ones have died during this year, find a way to honor their memory this holiday season and find ways to share your feelings as a family.
- Think together about your family values and traditions related to the holidays (the way you celebrate may change, but the meaning behind the holiday does not).



### ***Find Ways to Make Connections***

- Connections are extremely important during the holiday season. Discuss how your family will stay connected to loved ones and friends.
  - Arrange Zoom calls to light candles, sing holiday songs, or simply laugh and share stories.
  - Check in with elderly family members and neighbors using current social distancing strategies.
  - Create a small social pod that may be able to gather together for in-person holiday celebrations.
- Learn how gifts for teachers at your children/teens' school are being managed or ask about suggestions for these gifts.
- Find out what activities may be happening in your community to celebrate different holidays. Possibilities include:
  - Zoom holiday services
  - Zoom candle lighting for Hanukkah or Kwanza
  - Drive-in Christmas tree lighting and/or caroling
- Improve your mood by helping others, even when you may be stressed. Because your children/teens do not always see your donations to charity or worthy causes, think of a way to help others in which your children/teens can also participate.
- Volunteer as a family to:
  - Deliver meals or prepare food boxes for food banks
  - Wrap toys donated for a toy drive
  - Walk shelter dogs or play with cats
  - Shovel a neighbor's drive
  - Have each family member suggest one way to contribute an act of kindness to others
- Consider sending a special card to someone you know who is alone or may need some cheering up. Make a baked good and leave it at their door.



### ***Small Moments Matter***

- Ask your children/teens about one thing they would like to do this holiday season. Brainstorm together creative ways to make this activity happen.



- Together, start a new tradition. In years to come, everyone will certainly remember how and why this new tradition got started, thus creating new holiday memories. Let your children/teens help decide what the new tradition should be, like:
  - Making homemade decorations
  - Cooking a favorite dish (if you know, share the story about how this dish became a holiday favorite in your family)
  - Making homemade cards to send to special family, friends, and members of the community
  - Singing holiday songs
- Take a break from the media. Play a family game, watch something enjoyable on television, read a book, listen to music, build a snowman, or take a walk outside.

#### ***Keep to a Routine and Notice the Good Things***

- Maintain routines as much as possible for everyone. Schedules and routines tend to disappear during the holiday season, however, they can help reduce feelings of anxiety and depression.
- Recognize and share what each family member is grateful for this holiday season, including things you appreciate about each family member.
- When you see a behavior you like in your children/teens, tell them. A bit of praise, encouragement, and positive notice from you can make all the difference. This can be very simple. Things you could say include:
  - “I really appreciate the way you helped with dinner.”
  - “Thank you for watching a movie/playing a game with your sister while I finished up my work.”
  - “I like how hard you are working on the holiday card. I’m sure it will be appreciated.”
- 2021 is right around the corner. As it approaches, talk together about what you are proud of accomplishing in this very strange and challenging year of 2020. As the New Year approaches, consider having each family member set both a personal goal and a family goal to accomplish in 2021. Celebrate in some small way when the goals are achieved.

Check out [CDC guidance](#) to make holiday gatherings safer.

#### **TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF THIS HOLIDAY SEASON**

Just as you work to take care of your children/teens, remember to take care of yourself. When you take care of yourself, you are likely to be less anxious, depressed, and stressed. This will also increase your patience with your children/teens, which in turn, helps to reduce their distress. Modeling your own self-care also increases the likelihood that your children/teens will do the same.



### Ideas for Self-Care

- Eat well, especially as some holiday traditions may change typical eating routines.
- Be active or move your body in a way that you enjoy every day (e.g., take a walk, run, ride a bike, dance to your favorite songs).
- Engage in a relaxing activity (e.g., yoga, meditation, mindfulness, a hot shower/bath, reading).
- Connect with a friend or family member (e.g., FaceTime, phone call, Zoom, socially distanced meet-up).
- Give yourself adequate time for rest.
- Disconnect from all electronics for a bit each day.
- If you have additional concerns, look at [Understanding & Coping with Reactions in a Pandemic](#) for more suggestions.

### HELP IS AVAILABLE

- Even in the best of circumstances, holidays can be times of high stress. Most children/teens and adults are already experiencing higher stress and distress than usual. When children/teens are stressed, this is often seen in their behaviors. See [Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019](#) and [Helping Children Cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) for ways to support your children.
- For families who are currently involved in mental health services, continue to use the skills you are learning as you cope with the stressors of the holidays.
  - Talk to your therapist about actions to take if you or your children/teens experience extreme distress, anxiety, or depression during this time.
- If you are worried about your children/teens, or yourself, know that services are available even during the holidays.
  - Contact your local mental health care agency
  - Check with your kids' counselor, pediatrician or physician for a mental health referral
  - Call a helpline
    - Disaster Distress Helpline, Call (800) 985-5990, Text TalkWithUs to 66746
    - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Call (800) 273-8255, [Chat with Lifeline](#)
    - Crisis Textline - Text TALK to 741741
    - Trevor Project Lifeline (866) 488-7386 (crisis support for LGBTQ youth)
    - 7 Cups; Free, anonymous and confidential online text chat with trained listeners, online therapists & counselors; <https://www.7cups.com>



Additional NCTSN COVID resources can be found here: [COVID-19 resources](#)

#### CITATION:

Gurwitsch, R., Brymer, M., & Ghosh Ippen, C. (2020). *Supporting Children and Teens During This Holiday Season*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.