

How I Survive the Holidays!

Compiled by Laura J. Warren, Texas Parent to Parent



Let's face it – if you have a child with a disability, mild or severe, visible or hidden, your life is stressful. So, if the holidays are a stressful time for the general public, they will be doubly stressful for us. I've watched a lot of people go through the holidays, some more successfully than others, and decided to ask them for their best tips on surviving the holidays. Here's what they said:

- I make sure I take a little time for myself . . . without my children, dear husband and pet dogs. I enjoy walking - just 30 minutes can make a world of difference.
- Give yourself freedom to JUST SAY NO to something you really don't want to do. Whether it is a fundraising meeting, a PTA meeting, whatever task you really just don't want to do or have run out of mental or physical energy for, JUST SAY NO. True, this is not something you can "get away with" on a regular basis with whatever your responsibilities are, but if you own up to being just too tired or too overwhelmed, chances are your honesty will be appreciated. And if it's NOT, well, what were you pressing yourself to do it for if there wasn't going to be any appreciation?
- Something I do for myself when we've got a large group over (large for us is more than the 5 in our family!) is escape to our bedroom for a quick respite from the excitement. Entertaining exhausts me but I do enjoy family gatherings. I've just recognized that a five-minute break from the group can keep me going longer.
- Everyday, take ten minutes in a quiet room, lying down, with or without music/headphones, and FREE your MIND! Really focus on an absence of thought, and see where your mind goes. Whatever thoughts DO come in must be tossed away if they are stressful or negative. Just BE. No role, no problem, nothing to solve. Ten minutes. JUST TAKE IT. Take twenty if possible.
- Delegate whatever you can to others; give up traditions you don't enjoy; and most of all be careful to eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep. Holidays are to be enjoyed and if the one who is 90% responsible for the work of them isn't enjoying herself, then she can't make them enjoyable for the rest of the family. As my husband says, if Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.
- My key to surviving the holidays is to lower expectations. I have worked hard at establishing new traditions for our family that are nothing like what we did when I was a child or what the Norman Rockwell America is pictured as doing. Our traditions are much more informal, flexible, small scale, workable. That way we aren't disappointed by not conforming to the perfect picture. An example: the Christmas Day when my son was having a really bad day--maybe he was getting sick or something but he was terrible--crying, not cooperating, getting into one thing and being unable to switch to something else, including sitting down to Christmas lunch. Finally, we found the only thing that calmed him down was sitting in our car parked in the garage. And that's where he ended up eating Christmas lunch! No silver, no china, no demands on anyone. If he didn't want to open gifts, we would let him do something else and come back to gifts when things were quiet. The only guests we invite on holidays are people who know us well and can put up with his unconventional behavior. Is that giving in to my son or being healthy, realistic and flexible? I don't know--but I do know that this approach has really helped us with holidays.
- To get through the holidays, we try to keep the number of people visiting to a minimum as well as preparing our 8-year-old son with PDD for company through the use of pictures from the previous holidays, social stories, telling him stories about "the little boy whose cousins, aunts, etc. came to visit" for the holidays. We actually get respite from the various people who are available and offer to take care of him while we shop, go to the movies, etc.
- We're always the first to leave group gatherings. We've just learned from experience that pushing the kids (even when they beg to stay longer) ends up with disaster when we get home (they get cranky, fight with each other, and become impossible to reason with). We all enjoy the holiday events more when we set limits, not only to how many invitations we accept, but also to how long we'll stay before we ever leave the house for the event.
- When we're going to be with a big group of family, I plan and get the supplies together for a kids' activity. It's usually some kind of holiday decoration or food. That way I know it's something my daughter can participate in safely and not feel left out of the activities. Of course, the kids can choose to participate or not but at least I know that the only options available won't be just rollerblading, football, etc.

- We stock up on bubbles, playdough, and other activities that can be shared by the children. Because my son is possessive of HIS toys, these are presented as separate from his, i.e. community property.
- As for the kids, I recommend taking a sitter along on those Christmas shopping trips. I recently hired a student sitter, and for every paid four hours, he "gives" us a break time hour where he comes along on little planned trips, so I can focus on what I am trying to/want to do. Plus, I have made a point of getting time via this same sitter every week to spend time with just my husband.
- To help with behavior issues of having to "work" again once school starts, we enlist the help of teachers in providing practice sheets of work he is struggling with and set aside time every day, at least every other day, to "work".
- When we travel, my kids each have a backpack each that they fill with puzzles, books, crayons, etc. that they can take to entertain themselves. We also play guessing games of items we see along the road or goofy alphabet games.
- One thing that I have been doing, it's not really related to coping, but I guess integrating an additional something worthwhile into gift-giving, is give people gifts that benefit the International Rett Syndrome Association. You should have seen the looks on her therapists' faces last year when they all got a BIG roll of plastic wrap and NuSkin body lotion. (The plastic wrap was a fund raiser for IRSA, and I sell NuSkin products and donate the profits to IRSA.) It was really funny because they joked that they could do body wraps with them and lose some weight! This year, I ordered "Heavenly Chocolates" for gifts from a family in Florida that makes homemade candies and the profits are going to fund the future of their daughter with Rett Syndrome. She is now a young adult and they started the company when she was a toddler. The adults in our family are not giving gifts this year but donating to the charity of our choice, which means mostly to the IRSA. When parents of children with disabilities are asked by friends and family what they could get their child (or them) for Christmas, they could respond by asking for a donation to the appropriate organization (in the child's name) to be made to the local or national Down syndrome Association, etc.
- I try to buy gifts all year long whenever I see something that's just right for a person on my list and try to stay away from the malls at Christmas. Instead of individual gifts for kids in a family I usually get something they can all do--board games, boxes of art supplies, boxes of "let's pretend" stuff (thrift stores are a good source)--or give an IOU for an activity in the future like a trip to the zoo or lunch at McDonalds. Outdoor activity "kits" are fun, too--like a bird feeder and a bag of seed.
- Sam's Club has become my favorite friend around the holidays. They have huge pecan pies without the huge price and my family loves them. They are a hit at my house and they did not take all the time I don't have to make.
- I do as much cookie baking ahead as possible and freeze them. Slice and bake ones are great for kids to do--from scratch with little ones is just too much of a mess. Make get-togethers potluck.
- Decorations--if it's just for Christmas, it's work to unpack, then pack up again after the holidays, and find some place to store. I like to use arrangements with fresh fruits and vegetables and greenery from the garden--what doesn't get eaten afterwards can be pitched in the compost heap. Also, lots of candles.
- Give a party for another holiday--Valentine's, 4th of July--rather than Christmas. And make it potluck. Send cards for another holiday – people are just as happy to hear from you any time of the year. Start a new tradition!

So, I guess it all boils down to three things: keep it simple, don't try for perfection, make new traditions if necessary and try to take care of yourself.