

The Parent and Family Engagement Connection

Home & School

"Together We Can Make a Difference"**Shannon Lang**

The winter holiday season is growing ever closer, and feelings of excitement and anticipation begin to swell with all this time of year has to offer. As stores stock shelves with décor and toys, lights pop-up on businesses around town, and candles burn in windows, I am sent back to a simpler time, when as a child, I looked forward to the holiday season.

This was not just for the toys, the lights, and the food....but for the time away from school! What a precious gift it was to have two full weeks spent at home, in my pajamas with my sister and mom with nothing to do but play and watch TV.

My brain jumps back to our current reality, and I am struck with the thought that time away from school may not have the same meaning for my kids as it has in the past. I wonder if it will just seem like more of the last 18 months of the pandemic, or will there still be the holiday magic as before? The more I reflect, the more determined I am to help my kids not only navigate through the deep waters of Covid-19, but also find a sense of normalcy with the family traditions we hold so dear.

Here are some ideas I have for my own children to regain the magic of the upcoming season:

Limit screen time and device usage. Kids have been thrust into the virtual world for the past year and a half, so I want to make sure their eyes, ears and bodies have a break from screens, and they enjoy the simple and fun activities that the holiday season has to offer. Play board games together, read a book, do some crafts, and play outside.

Cook as a family! The holidays are a great time to cook as a family. Traditional family recipes that have been passed down through the generations are always a hit with the kids and will be a must this year. Cooking together has several learning opportunities as well, like using recipes and measurements to keep those reading and math skills sharp. Holiday cooking can make learning fun!

Refresh the house. We will be cleaning, rearranging furniture, and maybe even doing a little painting to make the house seem fresh and new.

Find volunteer activities. The family is searching for activities outside our home to serve the community, such as volunteering at a local shelter to wrap presents or deliver or serve meals, help neighbors with their yard, volunteer at an animal shelter, etc. This will provide the family time to socialize with others and help those in need.

As you spend time with your children in the upcoming months, I encourage you to reconnect with old family traditions, make new traditions of your own, and find ways to make the holidays you celebrate memorable to you and your children.

*Give out of love, not obligation.**Give when it's least expected.**Give without strings attached.**Give from your heart.**Give of yourself.**Give to show that you care.**Give help without causing helplessness.**Give something that takes personal sacrifice.**Give to make a difference.**Give without keeping score.**Give for no reason at all.**Give a little if you can't give a lot.**Give without attracting attention to yourself.**Give without being asked.**Give of your experience.**Give to those who need it most.**Author Unknown*

STRESS, DEPRESSION AND THE HOLIDAYS: TIPS FOR COPING

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of demands — parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few. And if coronavirus disease is spreading in your community, you may be feeling additional stress or you may be worrying about your and your loved ones' health. You may also feel stressed, sad or anxious because your holiday plans may look different during the COVID pandemic.

But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.



TIPS TO PREVENT HOLIDAY STRESS AND DEPRESSION

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. Acknowledge your feelings. If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

2. Reach out. If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events or communities. Many may have websites, online support groups, social media sites or virtual events. They can offer support and companionship.

If you're feeling stress during the holidays, it also may help to talk to a friend or family member about your concerns. Try reaching out with a text, a call or a video chat.

Volunteering your time or doing something to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. For example, consider dropping off a meal and dessert at a friend's home during the holidays.

3. Be realistic. The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.

4. Stick to a budget. Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Try these alternatives:

- ✓ Donate to a charity in someone's name.
- ✓ Give homemade gifts.
- ✓ Start a family gift exchange

5. Plan ahead. Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.

6. Learn to say no. Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.

7. Don't abandon healthy habits. Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt.

- ✓ Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks.
- ✓ Get plenty of sleep.
- ✓ Incorporate regular physical activity into each day.
- ✓ Be aware of how the information culture can produce undue stress, and adjust the time you spend reading news and social media as you see fit.

8. Take a breather. Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm. Some options may include:

- ✓ Taking a walk at night and stargazing.
- ✓ Listening to soothing music.
- ✓ Getting a massage, or reading a book.

9. Seek professional help if you need it. Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Take control of the holidays. Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.

Exercise and Nutrition

Have Young Athletes in Your Family?

Feeding them requires knowledge and planning. Not only do they need optimal nutrition for fueling and recovery from training, but they must also meet the energy demands of growth and maturation. Help your kids to refuel with the nutrients carbohydrates provide, focusing on family mealtimes before and after practice or competition.



Pre-Game Breakfast

- Gather the family together for a pregame breakfast. About three hours beforehand, have your child consume sliced and lightly grilled potatoes, paired with scrambled eggs and nutrient-dense carbohydrates such as berries and orange juice or fat-free milk for the optimal pre-game meal.

During the Game/Practice

- Make sure that your child keeps hydrated before, during and after practices and competitions. Dehydration results when your child athlete fails to adequately replace fluid lost through sweating. Dehydration that exceeds two percent body weight loss harms exercise performance, so make sure your child is well hydrated throughout the game with small amounts of water. Also, make sure to replace fluid losses after exercise by having your child drink lots of water. Look to foods such as bananas, potatoes and fat-free or low-fat yogurt or milk. They contain potassium and carbohydrates which are important to replenish after exercise.

Monique Ryan, MS, RD, CSSD, LDN

<http://www.eatright.org/resource/fitness/exercise/exercise-nutrition/feeding-your-child-athlete>

Blueberry Smoothie

Blueberries are amazing brain food. Just a half cup a day can help keep your brain cells healthy and your memory strong. Plus, blueberries are bursting with antioxidants—those amazing substances that keep your cells and body super-healthy. Add blueberries to smoothies and fruit salads, top your cereal with them, or freeze and eat them like tiny fruitsicles. Or make this creamy, blue smoothie to share.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1/2 cup water or coconut water
- 1/2 cup plain low-fat yogurt
- 1 cup fresh or frozen blueberries
- 1/2 overripe banana, peeled and sliced (frozen if possible)
- 2 ice cubes



INSTRUCTIONS:

- Put all the ingredients in the blender.
- Turn the blender to medium and blend until the mixture is smooth, about 2 minutes.
- Pour the smoothie into 2 glasses
- Serve right away—or store in a thermos or cover and refrigerate up to 4 hours.

healthychildren.org

Have a heart that never hardens,
and a temper that never tires
and a touch that never hurts.
Charles Dickens

Mark Your Calendar
December 9-10, 2021
8:30AM-4:00PM

Virtual
Statewide Parental
Involvement Conference

NO travel costs + LOWER registration fee
= MORE staff & parents can attend

www.StatewideParents.com

Community Service: A Family's Guide to Getting Involved

It's easy to feel disconnected, as many parents juggle work, school, kids, and activity after activity. One of the most satisfying, fun, and productive ways to unite is volunteering for community service projects. Volunteerism also sets a good example for your kids and helps the community.



Reasons to Get Involved

Why should your family lend a helping hand? It feels good. The satisfaction and pride that comes from helping others are important reasons to volunteer. When you commit your time and effort to an organization or a cause you feel strongly about, the feeling of fulfillment can be endless.

- **It strengthens your community.** Organizations and agencies that use volunteers are providing important services at low or no cost to those who need them.
- **It can strengthen your family.** Volunteering is a great way for families to have fun and feel closer. But it can be hard to find the time to volunteer. You could select just one or two projects a year and make them a family tradition.

What Kids Can Learn from Volunteering

If volunteering begins at an early age, it can become part of kids' lives — something they might just expect and want to do. It can teach them:

- **A sense of responsibility.** Kids and teens learn what it means to make and keep a commitment. They learn we're all responsible for the well-being of our communities.
- **That one person can make a difference.** A wonderful, empowering message for kids is that they're important enough to have an impact on someone.
- **The benefit of sacrifice.** By giving up a toy to a less fortunate child, a child learns that sometimes it's good to sacrifice and that there are important things besides ourselves and our immediate needs.
- **Tolerance.** Working in community service can bring kids and teens in touch with people of different backgrounds, abilities, ethnicities, ages, education and income levels. They'll learn that even the most diverse individuals can be united by common values.
- **Job skills.** Community service can help young people decide on their future careers.
- **How to fill idle time wisely.** If kids aren't involved in traditional after-school activities, community service can be a wonderful alternative.

Getting Your Family Involved

The Internet offers lots of sites with information about volunteer opportunities. You can also call a favorite charity, hospital, or church directly to see if they have any needs.

When looking for a volunteer position, remember that it may be difficult to find the perfect volunteer slot. Be flexible. It may take a while to find a perfect fit, but once you do, it will be worth it.

Good Volunteer Jobs for Families

Families can do many volunteer jobs. Even the smallest child (with adult supervision) can pick up garbage at the park, playground, or beach. You don't even have to be part of a big effort to do this.

Or become involved in repair and renovation efforts for low-income residents. Younger kids might not be able to do the big jobs, but helping out by fetching a paintbrush or holding the nails involves them just the same.

Work at a community food bank or soup kitchen as a family. Find an organization that serves the elderly. Take food to people who are homebound and visit with them. Your kids can brighten a lonely senior's day instantly. Offer your family's help at the local animal shelter. Help plant flowers or trees. The possibilities are endless.

Whatever you choose to do, volunteering and community service can benefit both the community and your family. Get involved today!

Excerpts taken from an article in Kids Health

What is the FAFSA and how does it work?



Before each year of college, apply for **federal grants, work-study, and loans** with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form. Your college uses your FAFSA data to determine your federal aid eligibility. Many states and colleges use FAFSA data to award their own aid.

FAFSA is not the financial aid itself, **so you do not have to pay it back**. However, students may use the term FAFSA to refer to the financial aid awarded after the student files the FAFSA. ... Student loans, on the other hand, must be repaid, usually with interest. Federal student loans may be subsidized or unsubsidized.

The 2022-23 [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA®) has been launched. New and returning students who plan to attend college between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023, should complete the FAFSA as soon as possible. To assist students and parents in the process, the Department's Federal Student Aid (FSA) office has been sharing tips [@FAFSA](#), including "[7 Things You Need Before Filling Out the FAFSA Form](#)" and "[8 Steps to Completing the FAFSA Form](#)."

FSA continues to take steps to make it easier to complete and submit the FAFSA form. For example:

- students' prior drug convictions, as well as registration status with Selective Service, no longer affect their federal student aid eligibility;
- FAFSA.gov is even easier to navigate to get help and information, with an entirely new look and feel; and
- in most states, applicants only see the questions on the FAFSA form that pertain to them.

Students and parents may complete the FAFSA form online at [FAFSA.gov](#) and through the [myStudentAid mobile application](#).

In related news, the Department released the latest [federal student loan cohort default rate](#), which decreased (from 9.7% to 7.3%) for students who entered repayment between fiscal years 2017 and 2018 and subsequently defaulted before September 30, 2020. This new cohort default rate represents the lowest national rate since the three-year rate was first released in 2012. Schools with high default rates may lose their eligibility to participate in federal student aid programs.

[U.S. Department of Education](#)

For the 2021-2022 school year, students who qualified for a Pell Grant award received anywhere between \$675 and \$6,495.

But just a few years ago, more than 2 million students who would have qualified for the Pell Grant failed to file the FAFSA. What's even worse is that 1.2 million of those students would have qualified for the maximum award amount.

Gameplan for Positive Parenting Your Teen



Remember You're a Parent, AND a Friend

Teens crave the security of knowing their parents understand them, appreciate them, and love them no matter what -- so they do want the relationship to be a form of friendship. But they also need to feel like they have some independence, so sometimes you may feel a bit shut out. If you can navigate your closeness in an accepting way that doesn't take advantage of your role as parent to tell your child what to do, he's more likely to open up and share with you.

Does a close friendship erode your teen's respect for you? No. Don't you respect your friends, and treasure those who are really there for you emotionally? If you offer your teen respect, consideration, and authenticity, that's what you'll receive in return.

And as close as you want to be to your teen, sometimes you will have to pull rank and say No. If you're doing it often, that's a red flag that something is wrong. But sometimes your teen will be looking to you to set limits they can't set for themselves. Sometimes you'll need to stick by your values and say no, whether that's to an unsupervised party or a very late bedtime. And, of course, sometimes your teen will be able to use your guidance to come up with a win-win solution that answers your concerns.

Establish dependable together time

Be sure to check in every single day. A few minutes of conversation while you're cleaning up after dinner or right before bedtime can keep you tuned in and establish open communication. Even teens who seem to have forgotten who their parents are the other 23 hours a day often respond well to a goodnight hug and check-in chat once they're lounging in bed. In addition to these short daily check-ins, establish a regular weekly routine for doing something special with your teen, even if it's just going out for ice cream or a walk together.

Parent actively and appropriately

Don't invite rebellion by refusing to acknowledge that your son or daughter is growing up and needs more freedom. But don't be afraid to ask where your kids are going, who they'll be with and what they'll be doing. Get to know your kids' friends and their parents so you're familiar with their activities.

Keep your standards high

Your teen wants to be his or her best self. Our job as parents is to support our teens in doing that. But don't expect your child to achieve goals you decide for her; she needs to begin charting her own goals now, with the support of a parent who adores her just as she is and believes that she can do anything she aims to. Support your teen's passions and explorations as she finds her unique voice.

Taken in part from an article in Aha! Parenting

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"Together We Can Make A Difference"



The Parent and Family Engagement Connection is posted on our website four times a year for parents and educators of Texas. This newsletter is available in Spanish, Vietnamese, German, Tagalog and Korean.

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