

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## Helping Your Preschooler Handle the Holidays

While the holidays are an exciting time for children and adults, they also can bring out the worst behavior in everyone. The holidays can stress you out so much that you forget to have a good time and enjoy your family.

Many families are stretched too thin during the holiday season. Even young children can sense added stress in the family. If you are uptight, more prone toward shouting or punishing your children or are unable to give your children some undivided attention, your children may act out as a result. Late nights and the frenzy of visiting friends and family may make your normally reasonable preschooler prone to tantrums and whining. Taking your children's needs into account and planning in advance for possible behavioral problems can minimize family stress.

Here are some strategies for coping with schedule changes, exhaustion and other problems that can cause children to act out:

- ✳ Make an effort to provide some structure for your preschooler. Maintaining the familiar routines that surround bedtime, meal times, and daily activities enable young children to deal with the excitement of the holiday.
- ✳ Set aside time exclusively for your children each day. If you are preoccupied and unavailable, your children may act out to get your attention. For example, plan to choose a Christmas tree together, go shopping as a family, play games or watch a video together.

- ✳ Be aware that children (and adults) who don't get enough sleep can be crabby. Avoid late-night outings if you can help it. If not, prepare yourself for some whining or other difficult behavior. Be sympathetic, rather than annoyed or upset.
- ✳ Be honest with your children about your own feelings. If you are feeling pressured, uptight or overburdened, tell them. Ask for their help or tell them you need to get away for a walk or need a time out in your room. If you do get upset and yell, apologize and move on. It's important for children to understand that you are human and make mistakes, but that you can admit your mistakes and ask forgiveness.
- ✳ Don't sweat the small stuff. Minor issues will arise. Assess whether it's really important, or whether you can ignore it. If you are concerned about gift-receiving etiquette, talk to your children in advance about appropriate behavior. But don't let societal pressure cause you to be harder on your children than you normally would be. Remember, children often don't mean to hurt feelings. They simply say what they think.
- ✳ Put your family--not your chores for your family--first. Remember that having perfectly prepared meals or perfectly wrapped gifts or perfectly decorated trees is not more important than creating great family memories. Holidays are for enjoyment and doing with family and friends.
- ✳ Relax and let go or share some of the little jobs. Think of all the jobs you do that little hands would enjoy:

- ▶ scrubbing potatoes
- ▶ decorating paper place mats
- ▶ mixing turkey stuffing
- ▶ putting stamps on or sealing cards or invitations
- ▶ stenciling window decorations
- ▶ decorating the tree

There's no end to the number of jobs you can delegate to your energetic elves. Even if they don't do the job as you would have, you'll see their faces glow when you praise them for their creativity and helpfulness.

- ✳ Plan time just for togetherness. For example, take a walk or ride around town to see the lights and cut your own Christmas tree.

### **Shopping with Children**

Shopping with children is often a challenge, especially during the holiday rush. Some tips to make the shopping trip more enjoyable/successful are:

- ✳ Plan the trip limiting the number of stores you visit to two to three.
- ✳ Limit the number of people for whom you purchase gifts to a very few and think about what you are looking for before you leave the house. Talk about gift ideas and budget with the children to eliminate inappropriate choices and prevent debates in the store.
- ✳ Shop when stores are least likely to be busy so that children are not overwhelmed by crowds. (When you are short and can see mostly knees and almost nothing on the counters, shopping is not fun.)
- ✳ Locate bathrooms BEFORE you need them.
- ✳ Shop when children are at their best: fed and rested.
- ✳ Include a light lunch or snack as part of the special time together.

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- ✳ Build in time to do what the children want such as visit a special store or see Santa Claus.

### **Develop Family Traditions**

Traditions and rituals are an important part of everyday life, but they become more apparent during the holiday season. Special foods, games, story telling, decorations, parties, visiting family, friends and neighbors, religious celebrations, giving and receiving, shopping, and many other topics come to mind when one thinks about special activities help make the holiday special. Developing family traditions can convey a sense of belonging and security to children.

### **Realistic Expectations about Gifts**

Children who think only about gifts can feel terribly let down when the holidays are over. Their new toys may not be all they thought they would be after they've waited for them for so long.

Talk with your children about gifts and your own sense of values about the meaning of the holidays. Then plan family activities in which gifts play only one part. Plan fun things to do before and after you open gifts. That way, gifts start to take their rightful place in the whole of the holiday season. Shift the focus from receiving to giving by making special treats or doing special favors for neighbors and friends, food pantry, or elderly shut-in.

### **Best Wishes for Your Holiday Season**

Families with preschool age children must balance holiday activities while meeting the needs of their children. With advance planning, you can help your preschooler enjoy your special family traditions and reduce holiday stress.

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