

Holiday Tips for Grandparent Caregivers

For most people the holidays are happy times, but for many grandparents raising grandchildren, these special days can bring on strong feelings of sadness, anger, loss, or guilt related to the family situation. The following are tips for helping your family manage holiday stress:

- Talk to a support group member, a friend, or counselor to help you work through your feelings.
- Keep holidays simple. Avoid the temptation to compensate for the losses grandchildren have endured.
- Keep realistic expectations in planning. The holiday does not need to be perfect in order for your grandchild to feel loved. You *CAN* feel good knowing that you are able to support, protect, provide for, and love your grandchildren.
- Include the child's parent when appropriate. Whether or not children have regular or infrequent visits with their parents, maintaining contact is important. It helps your child feel loved and connected. Even if a parent is in a long term drug treatment or in prison, your child can have a holiday visit. Many children imagine the worst about their parents, and seeing them healthy and safe can be a relief.
- Review your visitation rules with the child's parent. Rules may include no visiting if the parent shows up drunk or high. It is tempting to let rules slide on special occasions, but if you stick to them, you'll have a more pleasant visit and create a good family memory.
- Anticipate problem situations. Parents who can't take care of their children often feel guilty and ashamed. They may make promises they can't keep, try to provide gifts they can't afford, or fail to show up for a scheduled visit. They might pick fights with family members to cover their feelings of shame and sadness. They might get drunk before a visit because they're nervous or feeling bad and don't know how else to cope.
- Plan a relaxed visit in a location you feel comfortable with that is within the rules of any court ordered visitation. If possible, plan low key activities for the parent and child to do together (for example, cooking or making decorations). Tell the parent what the child has been doing lately, some of his favorite foods, TV shows, activities, etc. Encourage the parent to bring a small gift for each child. A handmade card or something from a dollar store can be a child's most cherished gift when it is given by their parent.

- Talk to children in advance about the visits. Ask them what activities they would like to do. Help them be realistic about what to expect. If you think the parent may not show up, or if you expect trouble, talk about that with the child. You might say something like, “Your mom is excited about the visit and I want you two to have a great time, but we know that sometimes in the past, she hasn’t always been able to make it to visits. Why don’t we plan something to do just in case your mom isn’t able to make it?”
- Expect your child to have mixed feelings at times during the holidays - excitement, nervousness, sadness, and anger. They may show these feelings by acting out or becoming withdrawn. Help them put words to their feelings. You can’t shield your child from life experiences, but you can be there for them. Be accepting and help them work through their negative feelings.
- Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own feelings and needs during this time. To help your grandchildren, you need to take care of yourself.

Reference:

- Adapted from *Holiday Tips for Grandparent Caregivers* by Kim Sumner-Mayer, Kinship Children of Alcoholics Foundation, an affiliate of Phoenix House. Keeping In Touch, Issue VII, Winter 2002, Brooklyn Grandparents' Coalition newsletter.