



Holiday Social Skill Strategies

The holidays are a wonderful time for participating in cherished traditions and making new memories. However children often spend time with family and friends they see only a few times a year, and for many children, social situations associated with the holidays are relatively unfamiliar. Help children prepare for holiday social situations with these strategies.

- 1. Remind Children** – Although children may hear about relatives and talk to them on the phone, they may have difficulty remembering people they do not see regularly. Help children remember family members' names and information by creating a family and friends book. On each page include a photo and one or two facts about the family member or friend. For example, their cousin Sam lives in Maine and is on the swim team. Include pictures from past holiday gatherings to review traditions. If you do not have pictures of specific activities, draw pictures or write stories.
- 2. Make Contact in Advance** – Have children send letters or emails to family members in advance. This is a good way to open communication for children. They can tell their relatives how much they are looking forward to seeing them. They also can mention shared interests such as being in the same sport as their cousin or having a model plane similar to the one Uncle Ed flew in the Air Force. Reminders of past shared experiences such as a favorite holiday dish or playing the family game of charades are another way to bring people together.
- 3. Practice Unfamiliar Situations** – Holiday gatherings often have specific etiquette. Practice new situations. For example, children may have food served to them at home, but holidays meals may be buffet style. If children are old enough to serve themselves, practice taking appropriate portions by having a few meals family style (food in bowls so children serve themselves) before the holidays. If it is a gift giving holiday, practice manners for giving and receiving gifts.
- 4. Bring Items that Initiate Social Interactions** - For children who are shy or working on social skills, help them initiate interactions by bringing familiar toys or items they can share with others. Discussing their favorite robot or sharing their favorite game with a cousin can help children transition to a new environment with less stress and anxiety. Be sure to discuss and practice sharing the toys in advance so children are prepared to share them with other people.
- 5. Review and Praise** – Review and remind children of social expectations in advance, immediately before, and in some cases during the event. The excitement of being around people, eating holiday foods, and participating in activities can be overwhelming so children may quickly forget what they practiced. Be sure to praise children for appropriate behavior.
- 6. Have Additional Plans** - If a child has special food or seating needs, parents should let the host know in advance. Although children may be told not to eat certain foods, they may not recognize the ingredients in some holiday dishes. For children with very limited food interests, have them try new foods, but prepare and bring a separate meal in case the menu is limited. Sitting at a table without a parent may be extremely stressful for some children so having some tables with adults and children rather than just tables for children and just tables for adults may be a way to plan in advance and reduce a child's anxiety.

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