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Keep Your Kids From Going Feral During the Holidays

Loosely maintain the three pillars of wellness — sleep, food and exercise — to help keep children on track.

By Jancee Dunn

Nov. 26, 2019



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If you have a young child, you've probably had it drilled into your head that kids thrive on routine. Small wonder that holiday time — with its explosion of cousins, flight delays, late bedtimes and the “fun uncle” who constantly slips your children cookies — can make parents exceedingly tense.

But your routines need not be completely disrupted, experts say. As long as you loosely maintain the three pillars of wellness — sleep, food and exercise — during the holidays, you can weather them with minimal meltdowns. “Sometimes it’s not so much about sticking to your home routine as it is about finding a new holiday routine,” said Corinne McDermott, a mother of two and the author of the blog [Have Baby Will Travel](#).

With sleep, Ms. McDermott suggests acclimating your child in a travel crib at home first. “And I traveled with my children’s crib sheet from home, usually swiped right off the crib the morning we were leaving,” she noted. “I’m convinced the familiar smell and feel helped my kids to sleep better at night.”

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If you’re flying, she suggests booking flights that align with your child’s nap times. If your kid naps well in a stroller, take long holiday walks with the stroller hood down so they’ll drift off to sleep (which benefits everybody).

If a hotel is in your plans, it’s always worth asking if it provides any reassuringly homey touches for kids, suggested Trisha Pérez Kennealy, owner of [The Inn at Hastings Park](#) in Lexington, Mass. “We’ve done things like kids’ books, blankets, milk and cookies, and we also have white noise

machines that people find useful,” she said.

A failure to nap doesn't imply lasting damage to children's sleep routines, said Dr. Rachel Lewis, a pediatrician at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center. “If you have, fundamentally, a good sleep routine at home, you can go on vacation and mess it up,” she said. “And when you get home, the night light will be the right color, and all the stuffies will be there, and not the one stuffie that's small enough to travel with, and you'll sleep-train them again and it's going to be O.K. These things are not permanently broken by vacation — they are temporarily broken by vacation.”

Food routines are also temporarily broken, often by sugar. When we visit my parents' house, my mother — militantly healthy when I was a kid! — now gleefully stuffs her grandchildren with sugary treats, starting with cotton candy-flavored cereal (yes, it exists) at sunup and ending with thick wedges of chocolate cake at sundown.

When that happens, “balance the sugar with a bit of protein,” said Dr. Richard So, a pediatrician at Cleveland Clinic Children's. “So if your kid has the cotton candy cereal, just say, ‘O.K., at least have this piece of sausage or an egg.’ The time it takes to digest the protein will head off the crash of the cereal.”

And if holiday dinners with family are boisterous occasions liable to distract your child from eating properly, “try to steal away 30 minutes or so before dinnertime to get the majority of a good meal in them,” Ms. McDermott said. “Once dinner starts, you'll be less stressed about what they are or aren't eating.”

Dr. Lewis adds that a few subtly placed standbys, like yogurt or cheese sticks, “can substitute for the creamed spinach that they're not going to eat.”

Exercise is key to a (relatively) smooth holiday. Barbara Reich of Resourceful Consultants in New York City, who is the author of “Secrets Of an Organized Mom,” used to have her twins run it out like greyhounds when they were in the airport before a flight. “When you have young children, the lifesaver in an airport is a balloon,” she said. “You blow it up, and it provides hours of entertainment, and acts as a magnet for other kids who will join the fun.” A jump rope is a similar, compact steam-releaser, “and you can use the jump rope yourself if you can’t get to the gym.”

At family gatherings, try to get the whole crew outside at least once, early in the day, before it gets dark. One year, to drive the kids out of the house, I declared that it was a “family tradition” to play basketball at a park down the street from my parents’ house. When children are young enough, all you have to do is announce in a formal voice that something is a tradition, and they will unquestioningly accept it as if it’s inscribed on a tablet somewhere.

And young kids love a project, Dr. Lewis said. “You know how that dog whisperer guy says that dogs always behave better if you give them a job? It applies to kids, too,” she said. “My mom used to have us ‘paint’ the side of her house with paintbrushes and water.” She suggests sending kids into the backyard or basement to play with, and break down, the holiday accumulation of boxes from online retailers. “Another job is that slightly older kids can make movies of each other. It can take hours for everybody to get organized and do it, and then the adults can watch.”

Or try a visual scavenger hunt, “like ‘Go and find how many houses have blue doors,’ which is actually not that common in the United States,” Dr. Lewis said. “And the dog can go with you, because everybody wants the dog to leave the house as well. You can do it in the city, you can do it in the suburbs, and lots of age groups can go.”

Even when you return home, experts advise building a little structure to help your children stay active and occupied in a healthy way during long

winter breaks. Ms. Reich says to plan one outing, like ice skating, that gets everyone out of the house once a day. “I’ve found that you can build an entire day around one activity that anchors things — the library, the park, even the grocery store,” she said. “Meet someone in the park, so the kids can play, then stop for lunch, walk home, and the day is basically over.”

And while routines are necessary for children and adults, Dr. So, of the Cleveland Clinic, cautions parents not to get too caught up with rigidly maintaining them during the holidays. He remembers as a kid himself the delicious thrill of running around with a pack of cousins and staying up late. “I want my kids to always remember, ‘Whenever I was with my cousins and grandparents, I got to do whatever I wanted that made me happy,’” he said. “So during holiday time, we relax on the routines and just say, ‘Have fun with your cousins as much as you can. Because that is your family.’”

Jancee Dunn is the author of “How Not To Hate Your Husband After Kids.”



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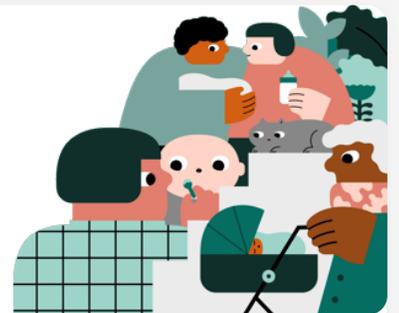
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