

Experiences, quality time and managing expectations: psychologists offer advice on navigating holiday season with children during the cost of living crisis

The BPS's Division of Educational and Child Psychology offers its expert advice to manage children's expectations this festive season, and how to focus on the smaller things that can mean a lot.

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By [BPS Communications](#)

"Families might be having to cut back not just on presents and gifts this year, but on visiting family and friends, and it may not feel the same as previous years. This can cause anxiety and stress for both parents/carers and children and young people when anxiety is already high about paying bills and everyday costs during the winter," says Dr Abigail Wright from the BPS's Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP).

"The festive season can often bring a whole range of different emotions for people, including joy and happiness, but also sadness and worry. These are likely to be heightened given the incredibly difficult times we are living in, and also following the disruptions of the last two years due to Covid." adds Dr Denise Miller from the DECP.

However despite these challenges, BPS experts say there are ways to make sure children and the whole family enjoy the festive season, and find the joy in the little things:

- Preparation is key. If you are worried about your children being disappointed with gifts, or not seeing as many friends and relatives, gently explain this to them early on, but also explain that it will still be a very special time for everybody.

- Explain to children that the most important part of the festive season is spending time with family and friends. When they look back, children's memories of the happy experiences of the time spent with loved ones will be far more important to them than the number of presents they receive.
- In this vein, there may be opportunities to spend time with family and friends which create happy memories and experiences but cost very little, such as going for a walk, visiting lights, watching a movie on television or playing games, going to a carol service or free musical performance, or borrowing books from the library.
- Both children and adults may also enjoy creative activities including making things, drawing, and writing stories and poems. Acts of kindness in the community can also provide a sense of purpose. Perhaps you could set up a Christmas treasure hunt activity for your children and your friends.
- If children do become upset because things are not as they expect and show 'big' emotions, a good approach to use is 'emotion coaching'. This is an approach that acknowledges how the child may be feeling while naming the emotion and showing empathy before looking to simply 'fix' the problem. This might be discussing an activity that may support them feeling calmer and less upset, or simply having a hug!

Finally, Alison Greenwood of the DECP emphasises the need for parents and carers to look out for themselves, as well as their children at this time of year: "As parents and carers, do make sure you also take care of yourselves and practice some self-care," she adds. "Take part in activities you also enjoy, and that promote your emotional wellbeing. Connect with yourself and what is around you - and if you can, use the support of friends and family."