

## SURVIVING FAMILY GATHERINGS WITH KIDS

By Elaine M. Gibson

A few things I've learned through personal experience might help those of you who will be taking children to visit relatives. Parents who expect their children to be on their best behavior when relatives are present are destined for disappointment and frustration. We can hope for it but we shouldn't expect it.

It is a mistake to expect too much from our children. They have never been perfect before but for some reason (the opinion of our families) we want them to be perfect in front of relatives. Travel, lack of sleep, change in eating habits, and stress are not the way to improve a child's behavior or a parent's. For a difficult child, multiply by a factor of 100.

### The following advice is offered:

- 1. Don't expect perfection from anyone -- children, yourself, or your relatives.** Family gatherings are not like the Coke commercials.
- 2. Prepare young children in advance.** Show them pictures of the family if they don't remember everyone and tell them enough about their relatives for the people to seem real.

- 3. Modify expectations concerning the children's behavior.** When children are tired and excited, they need help in calming down and coping with frustrations. Their behavior will not be predictable so don't overreact. Don't humiliate the child when he does something shocking (and embarrassing). People with children will understand; those without can't possibly understand, so don't try to explain. No one else will understand parenting a difficult child so wear thick skin.

- 4. Respect children.** They are not to be exhibited. Please don't ask them to show off. Let them be themselves. Give them permission not to hug or kiss anyone they don't want to embrace. If a child is uncomfortable with a relative, don't force the association. If a relative insists on the child kissing or hugging, step in and protect the child by saying, "Perhaps she needs to get to know you better first."

- 5. Don't talk about the child in front of other people if the child is over 12 months of age.** Very young children will assume they are the star attraction, demand attention, and quickly become unbearable. Older children will be embarrassed, start sulking, and will quickly become unbearable.

- 6. Practice being polite before you get there, not on the spot.** Teach the children to say "hello" and answer simple questions (What's your name, how old are you?) but don't expect (or force) them to do it until they are five years of age.

- 7. Relax your standards.** Rules and regulations need to be flexible during such times. If the other children are allowed to do it, don't single yours out unless their life is at stake. If the other children are not allowed to do something, your children should follow the same rules.

- 8. Discipline with courtesy.** If a child must be corrected or stopped, do so quietly without embarrassing the child. An unruly child needs to be removed from the situation, given an opportunity to calm down, provided with some

rest time and given some parental attention. Try not to overreact. You don't want to end up more embarrassed than the child.

**9. Take care of your own.** Don't try to reform other's children.

**10. Take care of your children's needs .** When they feel good, they act better. Try to see that they eat properly, get enough rest (too much attention from relatives can be exhausting), and enough physical exercise. They also need quiet time alone with their parents.

**11. Pay absolutely no attention to what others think of your parenting skills.** Family gatherings are not time to prove what a good parent you are. Whether your children are well-behaved that day or act like heathens, nothing you can do or say will change anyone's opinion of the situation. If they care about you, they will support you. If they make ugly, cutting remarks, they don't care about

you and their opinion is therefore worthless. If anyone criticizes your parenting, offer to let them keep your kids for the remainder of the holidays

**12. Pay absolutely no attention to what others think of your children.** Anyone who needs to compare children has their own problems. What they think is therefore useless. If you are fortunate and receive compliments on your parenting ability or your children's behavior, say "thank you" quickly. Things must be going well for the moment and it probably won't last long.

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*Elaine Gibson has combined 22 years of parenting with 20 years of a mixture of teaching elementary school, counseling in private practice, conducting parent educationa and teacher training classes. For more information on parenting difficult children visit her website at <[www.smu.edu/~egibson](http://www.smu.edu/~egibson)>.*

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