

HOLIDAY GREENS AND BLUES

By Barbara M. Newman, Ph.D.

Holiday time is a wonderful time of year, especially when we can celebrate it through the eyes of young children.

However, sometimes our children actually find the holidays to be quite stressful. There is so much activity, so much anticipation, and sometimes so little time to just relax and play with parents or siblings. The secrecy of the gifts, the coming and going of friends and relatives, the parties where children may not be included - these may all be sources of confusion.

You may be disappointed to find that your three year old is rather shy with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, or family friends who are not familiar. Children may withdraw, cling to you, or pull away as a dear friend or relative tries to give a hug or a kiss.

Remember that children need time to warm up to strangers. Just because a person is very dear to you does not mean that your child will feel affection for that person. Try to give your child an opportunity to be together with your family or friends in a quiet spot. Perhaps you can provide some crayons, a puzzle, or some modeling clay that your child and his or her relatives can work with together. In a short time a child can come to trust a new person, but affection cannot be expected to be produced on command.

Some children are not shy with newcomers. In fact, their parents find just the opposite. When friends or relatives come to the house, the children seem to go wild. They want to show off every toy, trick, and story they know. They want to be included in every conversation, and they seem to resent any adult interactions in which they are not included. Even children who are normally able to play quite well on their own suddenly need help with everything, from finding a piece of paper to turning on their cassette player.

Here we see the child's anxiety about being overlooked or left out expressed in a very direct

way. Once again, try to be prepared with some diversions that might appeal to a child. Explain your need to spend time with your adult friends. Help your children to see how your need is similar to their need to be with friends of their own age.

It is also helpful to try to put some time limit on your conversation. Let your children know that you need an hour with your adult friends, and then you can all visit. Or allow your child to visit for some time, and then ask him or her to find another activity so that adults can have some time alone. If children feel that they are included and that they can predict your behavior, it is a lot easier for them to control their own needs.



A second concern at this time of year is post-holiday "blues." Children may be grumpy, tired, or withdrawn. They may seem especially unable to find activities that amuse them, even when they have a whole array of new toys or games to explore. Parents may feel quite exasperated to find that all the holiday gifts do not bring days of spirited pleasure and play.

This is a good time to enjoy quiet times together. It is a time to build a fire in the fireplace and cuddle, to listen to favorite songs, to look through the family album, to sip hot cocoa, or to take a walk in the cold, quiet morning. It is a time to reassure your child that it is not the gifts or physical things that show your love; that you value your child for who he or she is; and that even though the holidays have passed, you continue to have a special feeling for your child.

The time after the holidays is also a good time to turn your child's thoughts to others. They may enjoy going through their old clothes to see which ones they have outgrown that they could now give to a younger relative or to children who may not have enough clothes. They may be willing to go through their old toys and decide to give some of them away in order to make space for their new things. They may like to write letters to their relatives or friends, telling about their holiday. And of course, it is a fine time to make projects with all the wrappings, ribbons, greeting cards, and evergreen boughs that have filled the house.

The holiday time is a time when intense joys and fears are aroused. It is a time when parents must be especially understanding. It is also a time when a special closeness can be achieved between parents and their children.