

Special-Needs Kids and Special Occasions

Making family gatherings good, not ghastly

by Terri Mauro

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Family get-togethers are the worst. Too many people. Too much noise. Too much food. Too many opinions on the ways you're raising your children. Never mind the fact that kids with special needs often go crazy during big family events -- they're often not exactly a shining hour for us as parents, either. How can you make it through the meal without chewing someone out, putting your foot in your mouth, or eating your words? If a quiet dinner at McDonald's is out of the question, here are some ways to get through these gatherings without going crazy.

Make an escape plan. Better to leave before things go bad than stick it out and live to regret it. If you're spending the holiday at a home other than your own, arrange a time limit or a signal ahead of time and observe it -- even if it means missing the pumpkin pie. If your child seems to be coping better than expected, you can always extend the deadline, but be ready to split at a moment's notice. If at all possible, when your holiday travels involve such a distance that you'll have to stay overnight, get a hotel room. Your child (and you) will need someplace quiet and chaos-free to decompress after so much family exposure. Then again, if everybody's coming over to *your* house for dinner, make your child's room off-limits to everybody but him or her, and encourage your child to use it as a refuge when things get overwhelming.

Clothes don't make the kid. If your child has sensitivities to certain types of clothes, or just stubbornly insists on wearing something you (or, you suspect, your mother) will find inappropriate, don't pick a battle today. Eyebrows may rise if your kid's in sweats while every other little cousin is dressed to the nines, but you want to start your child out with as low a stress level as possible. Fussing over clothes, or putting him or her in clothes that you know will cause anxiety, is a bad way to start. And this way, when the inevitable spills occur, you'll be the only parent at the table who's not worrying about ruined outfits.

Augment the menu. Whether you're bringing a little something to somebody else's party or planning your own repast, make sure there's something your child will enjoy eating. And then don't comment if that's *all* he or she will eat. The goal of the day isn't cleaning your plate or trying new foods or pleasing the cook. It's getting through the meal with a minimum of trauma. And, more importantly, it's about giving thanks for the good things in our lives. If your child only wants to give thanks for macaroni and cheese, so be it.

Be the one who watches the kids. Keeping a close personal eye on your little one has a number of benefits. You can intervene in inter-child squabbles. You can assess your child's level of overstimulation and act accordingly. You can play with your child if no one else will, or lead the other children in a game your child can participate in. And, perhaps most importantly during these events when you feel every judgmental eye is on you and your family, you can avoid conversations with grown-ups. You'd sure like to discuss your child-rearing flaws with Aunt Gertrude, but -- *oh, honey, do you need some help with that? Why don't we sit down here on the floor and do it together.*

Bring supplies. Fill a backpack with things your child finds reliably comforting or fun to play with -- toy cars, a stuffed animal, a tape and tape player, a few books. Having them available, even if he or she doesn't actually play with them much, may give your child a sense of familiarity that will be relaxing. If he or she gets overstimulated, find a quiet corner or a back room in which to spend a little time with the toys. If nothing else, toting the toy bag around and making it available when necessary gives you something to do that does not involve long conversations with unpleasant relatives.

Beware of bribes. You may be tempted to offer some big reward for your child's good behavior at a family get-together, but that can backfire. The fear of losing that much-wanted thing may add to your child's stress overload and actually bring on even worse behavior. Some kids may talk themselves out of wanting the reward because they feel so incapable of providing the required self-discipline. And once you've lost that incentive, things can go downhill very quickly. Small spontaneous rewards during the course of the event are often more effective, because they reduce stress and improve mood. Then, if your child does pull it off, you can always give the big reward later with much praise and encouragement.

Remain calm. Memorize this phrase, and repeat it over and over in your head whenever you feel yourself losing your cool: *I do not have to apologize for being a good parent to my child.* We may struggle under the weight of "advice" or disapproval from family members, but our kids don't care about that: They need what they need. You know best what your child needs, and providing it is your most important responsibility, no arguments. Since most children with special needs react badly to stress in their environment, particularly stressed-out parents, staying relaxed and low-key is one of the best things you can do to keep your child's behavior in line. You can always throw a tantrum when you get home.

Don't overbook. Hold the festivities down to one event per holiday. Don't hop from house to house, or plan a big outing the night before a family event. Give your child (and yourself) the maximum amount of de-stressing time surrounding the minimum amount of stressful activity. This may be a disappointment to friends and family members who feel you are sheltering your child too much or rewarding difficult behavior, but you know best -- better one successful foray into the outside world than three or four really miserable ones.