Keeping holiday high jinks under wraps

The hustle and bustle of the holiday season creates stress in the calmest of people. Arguments with the kids, your partner and the dog are nothing unusual at this time of year. Not to mention the personal pain you suffer trying to mimic celebrity domestic divas. But by embracing a few simple ideas, you can make the flurry of family activity easier for everyone.



Have fun together. The kids have their school concert, parties and want to get outdoors and play. You spend your time buying presents, sending cards and worrying about what you need to do next. With all the running around we do, we forget to enjoy what the season has to offer as a family. Sit down and let each family member pick a game, event or idea to do over the holiday season. It might be as simple as a walk in the snow or making decorations for the tree. Spend time doing fun things together and you'll forget your stress and steep yourself in holiday spirit.

Share the season. Not just the fun but the chores too. One person can't do everything, so split up the tasks. One parent (or older child) might do the shopping, while the kids wrap presents and another adult cooks. If you're hosting a party, why not make it pot luck? When you share the responsibilities, you lift a huge burden off yourself and spend quality time together completing chores.

Communicate and obliterate. It sounds a little like an Arnold Schwarzenegger line, but talking with your family about which events to attend and those to scratch off the list before you're smack-dab in the middle of the holiday season will reduce the chance of arguments and rid you of any last-minute showdowns about activities and visiting relatives. The same strategy works between partners. Money, especially, tends to be a common issue for disagreement so set out a budget and gift list ahead of time and stick to it.

Compromise. The kids don't want to travel to Aunt Elaine's house two hours away—and frankly, neither do you. Work on finding some middle ground and be prepared to make some trade offs. For example, you might let kids go out with their friends if they attend a family party earlier in the day. Also, make sure there are clear behaviour expectations. If you don't want your kids glued to the TV in a trance, let them know it and plainly lay out what you'd like them to do (e.g., visit an elderly neighbour, shovel the drive, or entertain cousins) and explain why. The holidays are also a great time to celebrate the spirit of co-operation. If one partner comes from a different religion or culture, create new ways of celebrating together, incorporating the most important traditions from each of your heritages.

Don't take the bait. There's nothing like a family celebration to bring out old tensions and ancient arguments that set your behaviour back a few decades. In many families, breaking out of your pre-assigned "role"—whether it's as the black sheep, perfectionist or loudmouth—can seem like an impossible task, even when it no longer holds true. If this is the case, the best way to break the cycle is to bypass comments or "bait" that normally send steam out your ears. If political discussions with your dad, for instance, leave you tearing your hair out, respectfully but sternly let him know you're not interested in talking about it and then re-direct the conversation. By anticipating and planning your response to those old family battles, you'll be able to freeze out hot-button issues and enjoy a cooler, calmer family gathering.

Just say no! You can't be everywhere all the time. The kids want you to drive and pick them up from the mall, you have three parties on the same night and your mom is on the phone asking you to go shopping. Trying to keep everyone happy can turn even the most well-intentioned of people into Scrooge. Brush up on your time-management skills: start shopping early to save time and avoid the pain of overcrowded stores; prepare a budget and stick to it; decide what events are important and only attend those. By planning your holidays before the season begins you'll keep the spirit aglow.

Remember what the holiday season means to you. When did the holidays become about presents, parties and food? At times—especially amidst 24/7 advertising, the looping carols, and screaming kids in the toy store—it can be hard to remember the season is about spending time with family and friends. Rather than focusing so much energy on the more superficial elements of the holidays, schedule some together time to

develop traditions and activities that put the people you care about most at the forefront of your celebrations.

While many people envision a Norman Rockwell-like picture of holiday perfection, the reality for most families is more like a modern painting filled with splashes of colour. But by embracing the mishaps with the marvels, and sorting out seasonal activities ahead of time, you're sure to create an inspired family portrait, perfect in its imperfection.