



Do Kids Get

When Laurie Jasper's daughter, Carrie, began to respond apathetically to the question, "What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?" the Beaverton mother of two became worried.

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"Instead of answering with the typical long wish list of a 7-year-old," Jasper says, "Carrie would shrug her shoulders and simply say, 'I dunno.' I could tell what she really meant was 'I don't care.'"

"It was strange," she says. "Just a week before, she'd been excited about Christmas just like other kids, but then she seemed to become depressed about the whole thing." Since we often hear that Christmas is all about the children, Portland-based therapist Wendy Robertson says, "It may seem odd that for many children the holidays inspire feelings of sadness, anxiety and dread." Yes, just like adults, children get the holiday blues. And, they can be just as hard on kids as they are on grown-ups.

Robertson says the symptoms may even mimic those seen in adults: a change in sleeping patterns, eating too much or too little, or avoiding contact or interaction with friends and family. But children often express their blues in different ways.

Child therapist Margaret Schilling says, "Children who have the holiday blues tend to be irritable, less patient, have more tantrums or angry outbursts."

Loss can bring on the blues

The blues often come to those who've experienced divorce, death, or the absence of a family member who is serving in the military. Robertson says in such cases, the holidays can be blatant reminders of what's been lost. Divorce, in particular, is the most common reason why kids find themselves down during the holiday season. Schilling says, "So many children today are from families of divorce, and for them, holidays are tricky as children have a natural yearning to be with both parents during special, celebratory times."

Ryan Ferris, of Portland, agrees. He says he remembers exactly when his childhood holiday blues began. It was when his parents

divorced and he began to experience "the stress of having to split time between parents and the emotions it involved."

When his blues came, Ferris says, "I felt strange, guilty, and sad about having to split time between the two homes and the disruption it caused when switching houses. Seeing my parents' sadness about sending us to the other parent made me feel bad too."

He adds that when he was around other kids he found himself "envious of their simpler holiday arrangements."

Portland therapist Anne Allanketner explains that emotions like Ferris' are to be expected. "Children who are going back and forth between two families may feel the stress of having to perform the holiday ritual twice. Eating two Thanksgiving dinners in one day or having two Santa Claus experiences in one morning is exhausting," she says.

In addition, media images that portray a Norman Rockwell version of the holidays can exacerbate envy like Ferris'.

Robertson explains, "Like adults, children are inundated with images of the perfect holiday. Reality may be painfully different. For many, the period between Thanksgiving and the New Year may be a time when expectations go unfulfilled."

Other reasons kids get seasonally sad

The painful effects of loss aren't the only reason kids get seasonally sad.

Another major trigger for a child's holiday blues can be the break in routine. Children thrive on consistent and predictable routine. During the holidays, these routines are not only disrupted but they aren't usually replaced with new ones. Instead, kids may find themselves being furiously rushed about from place to place.

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the Holiday Blues? By Mary O. Parker

"Sometimes," says Allanketner, "kids get lost in the high-velocity holiday orchestration that is supposed to be for them."

Schilling agrees and says, "The pace of the holidays can sometimes be fast." She warns that especially introverted, cautious, and less active children may find themselves drained by the busy schedule. Being drained sets a child up to feel emotionally overwhelmed.

At other times, likely during the two-week winter break, kids end up in the reverse situation where they have too much unstructured time on their hands. Allanketner is quick to point out that kids do need some unstructured time built into every day, especially unstructured time in nature just "throwing rocks into a stream or exploring the edge of the woods." But unfortunately, because of our plugged-in lifestyles, unstructured time for many kids takes place primarily in front of a television, computer, or video game.

Such a lack of physical activity aggravates the blues no matter what time of year. But when the more sedentary lifestyle of today's children is coupled with the disrupted routines of the holiday season, children are more prone to feelings of depression.

Kids can also pick up on the stress of the adults around them. In fact, Carrie's response to the question, "What do you want Santa to bring you?" may have come about from the tension she felt in her mother, who is a single mom struggling financially.

There's also a good chance that, on some level, Carrie felt she was contributing to her mother's holiday pressures. Says Allanketner, "Children tend to see themselves as the center of the universe. If adults around them are exhibiting stress symptoms, the child may feel responsible."

Especially in American culture, Schilling says, "There is a focus on presents during the holidays. This creates a lot of stress, both due to anticipatory anxiety and financial stress." Not only is behavior like Carrie's more common than we might expect, but experts also say it's on the rise.

One reason for the increase is the fact that so many of today's children have to split their time between two households. According to a 2005 Rutgers University study titled *The State of our Unions*, 37% of America's children do not live with both parents.

Another reason for the rise, as already noted, is an increase in sedentary lifestyles. Combine that with the fact that, during the holidays, children often aren't eating right or sleeping enough and you've got the perfect recipe for the blues.

Says Robertson, "Children and adults may be prone to overindulging in sweet, high-fat foods, resulting in fatigue and mood swings. The excitement of visitors and preparing for the celebrations may mean that the amount of sleep is reduced, leading to increased irritability."

Keeping the blues at bay

To help keep your child's blues at bay, Robertson suggests that you "promote moderation in the amount of planned activities and encourage and model healthy eating."

For those children who have experienced a loss of some sort, she says, "Encourage them to talk about it at their own pace." Keep in mind, hints Schilling, that children "usually have a difficult time identifying what is upsetting them."

For children who are experiencing feelings of loss brought on by divorce, Robertson suggests posting a calendar "outlining where and when the child will be staying to help alleviate anxiety."

She also advises, "If there have been recent changes to the family makeup or living situation, collaborate with the child on developing exciting new traditions. Encourage the focus on the future, not the past."

Revisiting traditions also provides an opportunity to teach children that the holidays are really about giving. "Reduce the self-focus by getting involved with a good cause, or let your child dedicate a toy to a needy boy or girl. Seeing others with less is a great way to shift a child's emphasis off of what they don't have to what they do."

Says Jasper, "Maybe what we should be asking our kids is what they want to give to Santa for Christmas."

"I wonder what Carrie would say to that?" she muses.

Mary O. Parker is a freelance writer whose work focuses on children and families.

