

Solutions Newsletter

Special Edition

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Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Helping Students Enjoy a Safe Winter Break

Most students eagerly await winter break each year and the relief it brings from the stress of homework, tests, and busy schedules. This year, as we approach nearly two years of life during a pandemic, winter break probably seems more appealing than ever. The stress of returning to school after a long absence, of following COVID protocols, of periodic school closures and quarantines, and the residual trauma from months of isolation and remote learning have left many students exhausted, anxious, and depressed.

This holiday season will bring a return to traditional celebrations for many students, and some well-deserved downtime. It is important for parents to recognize, however, that the increased vulnerability of their children due to the pandemic will necessitate some extra care. While freedom from their typical schedules is welcomed, the lack of structure and daily routines can sometimes heighten stress levels, and the resumption of busy holiday schedules may feel overwhelming for some.

To increase the likelihood of a safe and enjoyable holiday season with your family, please consider the following:

- Before school ends, work with your child's clinician to develop a personalized Safety Plan for your child. This plan can facilitate structure, identify resources, and list potential stressors and coping strategies. A one-page safety plan can include a list of safe places where your child can find a sense of calm and security when stressed and phone numbers of "safe people" to reach out to for emotional support and help as needed.
- Discuss expectations and plans for the holiday break with your child, making decisions together about what activities are most desirable and which ones might be eliminated to reduce stress. reach out to for emotional support and help as needed.
- Encourage your child to openly discuss increases in anxiety, depression, and other mental health symptoms so that you can work on it together and seek professional help as needed to avoid a crisis.
- Review with your child his/her most useful distress tolerance strategies, such as deep breathing, listening to music, writing in a journal, playing with a pet, taking a bubble bath, calling a grandparent, etc.
- Don't adopt an "anything goes" approach during the break: maintain a daily routine including regular mealtimes and bedtimes, and make sure that any medications are taken as prescribed.
- Negotiate screen time. School breaks should not provide a green light for unlimited video game, social media, and other screen time.
- Discourage isolation and inactivity. Get your child outside! Research shows that more time spent outdoors is associated with increased emotional well-being. Being out in nature and increased physical activity are proven ways to boost positive moods, and to provide children with an outlet to discharge energy and anxiety.
- Monitor your child's access to sugary foods and alcohol as these are often in abundance in homes during the holidays.
- Adopt what practitioners in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) call "walking the middle path". Acknowledge and validate your child's emotions, perspectives, desires, and beliefs while at the same time reinforcing rules, limits, and expectations.
- TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF! Considering ongoing COVID concerns, respect your own boundaries about what activities feel safe or unsafe for you. Avoid the urge to over-do everything this holiday season because of the limitations last year. Your health and well-being directly impact the health and well-being of your child.

ESS staff wish you a safe, relaxing, and joyful holiday season!