



Stepfamilies Tip Sheet: School Holidays



Surviving school holidays

While school holidays are generally a happy time for families to enjoy together, it's important to be aware that they can place additional pressure on families, and potentially on some children and young people's mental health.

There are some simple steps to take to reduce this pressure.

Boost healthy activities:

Set reasonable expectations about technology use. If there's too much screen time, the holidays won't be as recharging and health promoting as they could be. This goes for both of you! Have 90 minutes limits in the morning and then tell your child they need to get on with a plan for the day. It's worth noting that police have reported an increase in cyberbullying during school holidays, so start a conversation about this, and be aware of your children's online activities.

Connect:

Help kids who may feel a bit lonely over the holidays by planning outings to connect with friends. Make meet up plans (parks, BBQs) with other families, or reconnect with relatives, extended families or others. Look-out for local events to make some new and positive community connections.



Be sensitive:

If children or young people are experiencing grief or loss, holidays and special events, such as Christmas, can be a challenging time. It is important to include them in some creative planning to spend the day in a positive way. They may want to do something special to remember their loved one, or they may prefer to go on as normal.

Keep an eye on them:

The 2nd Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health & Wellbeing (2015) indicated that 13.9% of children (4-17 years) experienced mental disorders (i.e. depression or anxiety) in the past 12 months. This equates to 560,000 children and adolescents, so it isn't rare. The 3rd survey is still ongoing, so more recent numbers are not yet available. Make sure to keep the communication lines open, monitor outings and help them do the things that are more likely to help with recovery and wellbeing (social connection, exercise, good nutrition) without panicking about them.

"The only thing I love better than the wonderful low stress first day of the school holidays, is the last day – when I know they are going back tomorrow!"

Watch yourself:

Parental stress can increase over holidays, which can have an impact on children. This is usually due to parents feeling overloaded or stretched between home and work. Sit down as a family and make a collective calendar. Schedule some movies or fun days out, along with some times when they are cared for by others, and some independent, quiet times (if appropriate). Stress levels will drop if you have a break from constant negotiations, event management and oversight of everything. Some self-care and sustenance is really important. Take to the couch with a book, walk with a friend or a coffee catch-up with someone who makes you laugh.

Get them talking:

Encourage children to call one another and make arrangements to meet up. As they get older, they need to take some responsibility for arranging their play times and letting the adults know the times and locations. This is good communication practice. Use the school holidays as opportunities to let them have some extra responsibilities, e.g. help with shopping or cooking.



Keep tabs on them:

You don't have to interfere, but do set expectations so you know where they are at given times. Set some age dependent rules, i.e. leaving notes, locking up the house or calling if they are going out with a friend. Even if you are at work, ask them to check in with you throughout the day. Young adolescents will naturally try to take some risks and push boundaries, so don't assume the little angels are at home just reading books! Keep your eye out or enlist friends and neighbours. Older adolescents also need boundaries that are consistently followed while giving them some freedom.

Maintain healthy routines:

Sensible bed times, night-time stories and good nutrition are important. Some holiday 'treats' are ok but letting standards drop too far can cause issues when it's time to resume school and settle down. It's a great time to catch up on sleep and do physical exercise so you all feel genuinely tired at night. Encourage kids to get outside: on their bikes, long walks, swimming and helping with chores or gardening.

Children as carers – acknowledge their workload:

If your child is a carer, as many children are, holidays can be very different for them, so try to negotiate some time off for them during the holidays. Ask them what they would enjoy doing and call on friends and family or local services to support their ideas. COPMI is useful for children and young people who care for someone with mental health issues. www.copmi.net.au

Music as medicine:

Fill your house with music during the holidays, try some new tunes, make a playlist together and start the day with your favourites. This could be a regular holiday tradition. Pump up the volume and have a dance.

Check in:

Ask your children every few days how they are feeling, which activities they have enjoyed and if they need support. Communication and warmth is the key. It's not about having fun every minute of the day, it's about rest and replenishment so they are healthy and happy enough to enjoy not being at school.

Small tokens:

Children only need small tokens or gestures to feel special and acknowledged for what they have done. Ask them what they may like and try to buy health-promoting gifts (e.g. bikes, trampolines and sports gear are better than video games). Make some oversized cards listing their achievements or some memorable funny moments.

Life is busy, but do your best to take time out to enjoy the holidays. Focus on the good parts and stay positive with your family, remember to ask for help when you need it too.

Where to access further help

Stepfamilies Australia
www.stepfamily.org.au

Family Relationships Advice Line
1800 050 321

Lifeline
13 11 14

Raising Children
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelp.com.au