



## Finding joy and thriving through Christmas and the school holidays

Christmas can be a time for family, connection and celebration. For many this time also brings stress and other emotions like loneliness, sadness, disappointment and grief. Such feelings can arise especially if this is the first Christmas since a beloved family member has died, a couple have separated, or if there are complex relationship dynamics within the family. Financial strain can impact families as they try to pay bills and have money for extras like presents and parties.

For separated or blended families, deciding who the children spend Christmas Day with can be a very difficult issue to work through, especially when communication isn't always respectful. For many families, mixing relationship difficulties and old wounds can create a pressure-cooker environment, especially when adding alcohol into the mix.

While long summer school holidays are a welcome break from tiredness and the busyness of the school year, there can often seem like there is little respite for parents.

At Parent Line, we acknowledge all of the above and have created the following tips to support you to connect with your family and kids whilst taking care of your own needs, so you can survive and thrive through Christmas and the school holidays.



## 1. Plan and keep some normal routines

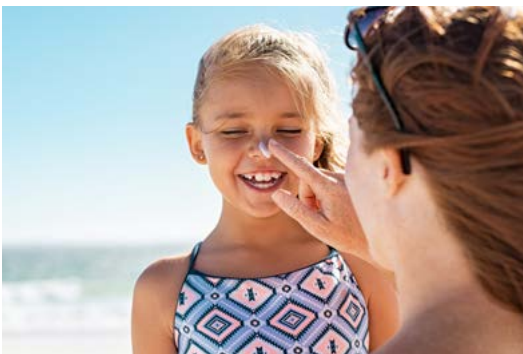
- On Christmas Day, plan eating times. When is the best time for gift giving? Maybe have some backup activities planned in case kids become overwhelmed, need to release some energy or family tensions build. Game of cricket anyone? Board game, walk or a swim? Have a Christmas movie downloaded that all the kids can enjoy.
- Get your kids involved in making a list of activities that they would like to do, planning for different kinds of weather.
- Schedule down time as well as time for family group activities, without trying to do too much.



Dr Justin Coulson, psychologist and father of six, offers the following wise suggestion: “For kids, make sure you maintain healthy routines. Keep them on a reasonable bedtime schedule and eating healthy foods. If they are having worries, talk about those and come up with an action plan. For example, if they’re starting a new school, go for a walk-through of the school grounds. If they’re missing their friends, arrange a play date”.

## 2. Keep it simple this year

- Remember that keeping things simple reduces stress and creates a calmer atmosphere. Give yourself permission to take some short cuts with Christmas lunch, for example.
- Similarly, setting boundaries around the money spent on gifts can be helpful. Home-made gifts and cards or Kris Kringles can reduce spending and post-Christmas debt.



## 3. The best things in life are free

- To balance the extra spending that can often accompany this time of year, plan some free activities to reduce costs and to teach kids that they can have fun without spending or getting more stuff.
- Make sure your holiday activities list includes plenty of free activities like picnics, bike rides, trips to the beach and action in the great outdoors. Libraries, museums, art galleries, local councils and even local shopping centres, often offer kid-friendly activities, which are usually free. Follow the strengths and interests of your child.

## 4. Boredom is good

- Unstructured time and breaks from devices are good for young brains. This provides a brain break and the opportunity to explore, get creative and play. Kids may winge at first but remember that boredom can lead to resilience and inspiration, if we allow them to feel this very normal emotion.

## 5. Support and connection

- It's OK to ask for help to share the load. Where possible, ask the child's other parent, family or friends to help care for children or to provide support in other ways.
- Having a support system is crucial for any parent. This could be talking to a professional or getting to know other parents in your community. This gives parents the opportunity to interact with other parents whilst giving the kids a bit of play time. As connections develop, you could arrange playdates where kids are dropped off for a few hours. This gives the non-hosting parent a break and then can be reciprocated over the holidays.



## 6. Practice acceptance

- There is no such thing as a perfect family or holiday. Have realistic expectations and prepare for possible relationship issues. It can be helpful to have some communication and emotion regulation strategies ready. Remember, the big picture is that you only need to survive a short time with the family during the festive season.
- Even the best made plans may need to be ditched last minute due to illness or accidents. Whilst stressful, unforeseen events often teach us and our kids valuable life lessons, even creating a great story down the track.



## 7. Consider mental health and wellbeing

- Whilst it may be a tradition to go on an annual family holiday or attend a family Christmas dinner, maybe your teenager is too depressed or your child with ADHD will be labelled by judgemental relatives. Consider whether it's essential when it may impact mental health and wellbeing for you or your child, especially if dynamics have been extra triggering and challenging this year.

## 8. Don't forget self-care

- Look after yourself and take time out to relax, even if it's half an hour to have a cuppa, read a book or go for a walk. Five-minute mindfulness breaks using an app like Smiling Mind can be hugely beneficial for managing stress and mental health over time. Be mindful that happy and relaxed parents make for happy children.
- Having compassion when we or our kids make a mistake can really support coping, as can a gratitude practice. On Christmas Eve or Day, ask each family member to name something they are grateful for this year.

## 9. Reflect and create space for joy

- Try to be present and to enjoy some moments (rather than every moment) this Christmas and school holidays. What brings you joy at Christmas? Create the space to find moments of joy in the lead up and on the day. Mindfulness strategies can help with this, such as noticing the sights, sounds, smells and other sensory delights of Christmas.



## 10. Holiday connections help us the rest of the year

- School holidays provide opportunities to connect with and get to know our kids better. Use the school holidays to spend one-on-one time with each family member. Holidays away from home are a chance to decompress, do less, rest, enjoy nature and create memories with our kids.
- Parent Line can also provide phone support throughout the holiday period. Our counsellors are here for you seven days a week, 9am to 9pm on weekdays, and 4pm to 9pm on weekends (we are closed on public holidays).

