



Planning Time for Togetherness

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

As a child, I remember feeling a bit befuddled about my mom's edginess when my grandparents came to town. I certainly felt nothing but excitement about their visits. As a child, I didn't have a sense of how my grandparents' presence would change our family routines and shift our family dynamics.

No matter how loving, patient, and well-meaning our extended families can be, having additional people mixed into the scene, especially during the holiday season, can add layers of stress. Often our children absorb this unspoken stress. Their behavior may even shift as a result.

Recently, when my parents came to town for a visit, I was completely focused on wanting everything to be perfect during their stay. Even though they were flexible and easygoing, I was anxious about how my children would behave, worried about making sure everyone was happy, and distracted by coordinating meals and activities.

When my youngest child started launching into a slew of attention-getting behavior, I realized he was sending an important message about his unmet needs. I needed to shift my focus.

The first thing I did was to give him my complete attention. I watched him draw. I sat next to him. I helped him when he asked, even though I knew he could do the various tasks himself. This "tending to" didn't last long. Within 15 minutes of undivided attention, he was chipper and cooperative. Even a few minutes of loving attention can refuel a child feeling disconnected.

Once my son felt secure and satisfied, I was able to talk with him about how I had been feeling stressed. I apologized. Then I explained that our routines were going to be a little different with Grandmom and Granddad visiting. I also reaffirmed the importance of being respectful and polite with visiting family members, a message he was ready to hear after he felt connected to me.

In preparing ourselves, and our children, for time with extended family and changes during the holidays, we can consciously reflect together about what routines will shift, what traditions we want to honor, and what joys and challenges the time may bring.

Will bedtimes be different? What will change about meals together? What kinds of activities will likely happen?

Our children like to be prepared and have a sense of what to expect. Involving them in the discussion, planning, and preparation can alleviate not only their anxiety but also our own angst.

Mapping out the days and what to expect on a family calendar provides a visual guide for the changes in routine. A whiteboard works well, easily allowing for modifications if the plans become overwhelming. Have conversations about what activities are most enjoyable for everyone. Cut back on those that are not essential.

Collecting snippets and stories of favorite experiences can be a bonding experience for extended family members. Part of the ritual of coming back together around the holidays can include sharing, and even documenting, different memories of past times together. This kind of sharing offers everyone a way to reorient and reunite. The recollections can even be collected in a kind of family memory book that can be pulled out when everyone gets back together again.

Children and relatives want to help. Intentionally enlisting extended family to support children's involvement can create a win-win for everyone. Some possible collaborative activities include food preparation (scrubbing potatoes, mixing dough, tearing lettuce for a salad), making simple decorations, setting the table, folding the laundry, and even dusting and tidying. We all feel more settled when we feel useful and engaged.

This holiday season we have an opportunity to consciously create new rituals and opportunities for our children and our extended families. Rather than rely upon old patterns perhaps learned from previous generations, let's plan our time of togetherness and mindfully prepare ourselves and our children.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker is the Director of Education and Co-Founder of The Montessori School of the Berkshires. This holiday season her three children and husband look forward to creating some new family rituals with extended family members. www.berkshiremontessori.org

