Parenting Tips to Help Keep the Holidays Happy

Keep your holidays happy with these six tips from USU Extension family life specialist David Schramm.

The holidays can be a magical time of year with great food,

movies, traditions and decorations. But they are also a busy time that can cause stress. And when the kids are out of school, they can become tired, argumentative and overexcited, which in turn can cause frustration for parents. It's important for parents to keep things in perspective so the holidays stay happy.

Consider these tips for dealing with holiday stress:

- **Set realistic expectations**. Not everything will go as planned around the holidays. The food may not turn out as planned and things can get spilled or broken. Be positive, flexible and open to changes and messes. Try not to overschedule activities to the point that it becomes more stressful than enjoyable.

- **Pay attention to bids for connection**. Children thrive when their parents give them attention, affection and connection – especially during the excitement of the holidays. Plan to give them your dedicated time at least once per day, offering full attention for whatever *they* want to do (board games, playing in the snow, reading books, etc.).

- **Hold up the emotional mirror**. Many parents will see a range of emotions from children around the holidays. Mirror their excitement, show understanding when they are sad, and express empathy when they are upset.

- **Grant in fantasy what you can't grant in reality**.

Instead of squashing your children's holiday dreams or their gift list, let them know you hear them and understand. Phrases such as, "Wow, that would be fun!" or "I wish we could do that too!" can give them the next best thing to what they want, and that is knowing you understand what they want.

- **Don't use unrealistic threats** such as "Christmas will be cancelled if…" or "Santa won't bring you toys if…" Strive to be positive, but still follow through with rules and unacceptable behavior.

- **Take care of yourself** or your happy holiday may turn into a Noel nightmare. When parents are stressed out, it often spills over and children feel it. Take time for yourself. Exercise, get adequate sleep, take some deep breaths and try to see the bigger picture. Make positive memories and enjoy the moments, because they don't last long.

This article was written by David Schramm, Utah State University Extension family life specialist. See more from Dr. Dave on Facebook.

---

6 Ways to Conquer the Inner Grinch This Holiday Season

If you struggle during the holidays, you're not alone. Try these strategies to make your holiday season a little easier.

Tears streamed down my face as I scooped cookie dough into perfectly shaped balls to roll in sugar. In the background, *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year* played and all I could

think was, “This doesn’t feel like the most wonderful time of the year. I feel like I’m ruining the magic.”

For days my kids had been begging me to make cookies. I finally decided that we could make cookies for Santa now, on December 1st, and freeze the cookie dough to simplify activities and save time when Christmas Eve came. While making the dough, my 6-year-old daughter dropped the measuring spoon in the mixing bowl while it was mixing. Dough splattered *everywhere*—our hair, our clothes, all over the counter, the ceiling was spotted, and even a closet door in the family room 15 feet away was dotted. I should have found it hilarious (it is now that I write about it…), but it was an added straw to the stress of the day, and I was frustrated.

As my daughter happily licked the dough off the mixing arm, I scooped and molded the dough, listening to the music on the bluetooth speaker and cried. The expectations for magic in the season weighed on me. Instead of feeling like a happy Christmas Elf, I was feeling like a rotten inner Grinch.

I love what most of the holiday season brings and represents, and yet I still feel discouraged at times. I know I’m not alone in feeling overwhelmed by holiday happenings. Studies show that anywhere from 45-69 percent of us are overwhelmed and stressed by one or more aspect of the season. It can come in the form of stress, anxiety, or seasonal depression. Among those who don’t view themselves as being stressed or anxious, it can be displayed through stress responses such as headaches and illness, excessive eating or drinking, or insomnia. Many parts of the season contribute to these feelings, including financial stress, relationship stress, and exhaustion from expectations for gifts and parties.

I am a mother of four children who are excited and anxiously awaiting the magic of the season. Their constant excitement, questions, and desire to do everything can weigh on me like it did while making cookies. The following techniques have helped

me over the last few years to bring balance to the demands and expectations I feel, and can help us all to bring out the inner Christmas Elf.

1. Be realistic. Make a list of what is most important to you and your family. If needed, choose the top most important activities only and focus on those so you are not overburdened.

2. Spread out the fun. The holiday season is just that – a season. Not everything needs to take place on Christmas Eve or while the children are out of school. Spread out the activities – from making cookies to enjoying your favorite holiday lights – from Thanksgiving weekend to New Year's Day. If it helps, write things on a calendar the whole family can see so they know when to expect that activity. Be flexible when needed.

3. Simplify. Not all activities need to cost money in order to create memories. Not every activity needs to be "Pinterest" perfect. Remember to soak in the energy of the moments–take photos to remember. Don't over commit yourself. It seems to happen that multiple events or parties are scheduled the same evening. Choose one to enjoy thoroughly and don't stress about trying to leave one early to get to the next late. Let go of a tradition or activity this year if it is too much–plan it for next year if it is something you missed.

4. Prepare early. Set a budget months in advance (if you didn't this year, start planning for next year in January). Shop for gifts early and keep track of the gifts you purchased through the year to stay within your budget. Use calendars and reminders to prepare for activities in advance. If it's too late, or a last minute event, then simplify as you can.

5. Take care of yourself. It can be easy to focus on everyone else this time of year, but remember your health. Eat well.

Sleep. Exercise. These healthy habits will help keep your immunity up and can help keep you feeling refreshed and less stressed.

6. Forgive yourself. Be kind to yourself. When you've done all you can, stress still happens. Practice talking to yourself kindly and forgiving when you feel unmotivated or frustrated. Be mindful and acknowledge your feelings, write about it or talk about it, and then let it go as you forgive and move forward.

This article was contributed by Melanie Jewkes, USU Extension associate professor.
Melanie.jewkes@usu.edu

How to Care for Holiday Plants

Tips for caring for holiday plants such as live Christmas trees, poinsettias, Christmas cacti, amaryllis, paperwhites, and mistletoe from USU Extension gardening experts.

Safety First During the

Holidays

The holiday season can be the most wonderful time of the year, but it’s important to keep safety in mind so you can avoid accidents and injuries. Consider these tips.

Toy Safety

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, about 260,000 children were treated in emergency rooms in the United States for toy-related injuries in 2016 and 2015. Tips for selecting toys:

1. Consider the age recommendations on the toy, combined with the child's skill set and interests.
2. Check out all safety labels to see if the item is flame retardant, flame resistant, washable, non-toxic, etc.
3. Be sure to check warning labels for choking hazards and other concerns. The toilet paper roll test is a good one to use. If the item fits through a toilet paper roll tube, it is probably a choking hazard.
4. Inspect all toys for sharp points, edges, materials used (glass, metal, brittle plastics) and any removable parts that may pose a hazard if lost or removed. Before giving toys with these hazards, carefully consider the child's age, as well as the ages of younger siblings. This can be a particular problem with game pieces and parts that are safe for older family members, but could be dangerous if left around for babies and toddlers to find.
5. Provide proper safety equipment such as helmets and knee pads for bikes, scooters, skateboards, etc.
6. Are there strings, cords or ribbons that have the potential to cause strangulation? Long cords on pull toys could be a problem, as well as hanging mobiles in cribs and playpens.
7. If paints, crayons or art markers are on your list, look on the packaging for "ASTM D-4236." This means the product has been properly reviewed for potentially toxic contents.
8. Inspect toys for damage and make repairs if needed. Keeping toys, play equipment and protective gear in good repair will also help protect children from injury.

9. To receive notices of recalls, visit www.recalls.gov. If you think you may have a toy in your home that has been recalled, check the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) website at www.cpsc.gov/en/Recalls.

To report a dangerous product or a product-related injury, go to www.SaferProducts.gov or call the CPSC's Hotline at (800) 638-2772. You can also obtain news releases and recall information on Twitter @OnSafety or by subscribing to the CPSCs free email newsletters.

Electrical Safety

This time of year, there are far too many house fires associated with electrical mishaps. When buying and using decorations with electricity, consider these reminders:

1. Only buy electrical equipment that displays a label showing a nationally recognized safety testing laboratory such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL), Intertek (ETL), or Canadian Standards Association (CSA).
2. Be sure to buy decorations and extension cords according to your intended use, whether outdoors or indoors.
3. Do not overload extension cords and multi-plug power strips, and do not chain them together.
4. Check for cords that are worn out, frayed or split.
5. Make sure that cords are not pinched in doors, windows or under heavy furniture, which could damage the cord's insulation.
6. Do not remove the ground pin, use a converter to make a three-prong plug fit a two-prong outlet.
7. Keep outdoor extension cords clear of snow and standing water.
8. Send warranty and product registration forms to manufacturers in order to be notified promptly in the event of a product recall.

9. Keep decorations and cards away from fires and other heat sources such as light fittings.
10. If you have old Christmas lights, consider buying new ones. Newer options will meet much higher safety standards.
11. Don’t let children play with lights, as they could swallow the bulbs, and remember to switch off the lights when going out of the house or to bed.
12. Consider LED lights. They generate less heat – which translates into greater energy-efficiency, but they are also less of a fire risk. LEDs are made with epoxy lenses rather than glass and are much more durable.
13. If you have an artificial tree, choose one that is tested and labeled as fire resistant.
14. Be wise and cautious when using space heaters, and make sure smoke alarms are working.

Food Safety

While our food supply is one of the safest in the world, some 76 million people a year get sick from food-borne illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Consider these food safety tips:

1. Clean – hands, cutting boards, tools, etc.
2. Separate – keep raw meats away from other foods, and use separate cutting boards for raw food.
3. Cook properly – cook foods to the right temperatures, and use a thermometer. Reheat leftovers to 165 F.
4. Chill – chill food promptly and properly. Illness-causing bacteria can grow in perishable foods within two hours unless they are refrigerated. Quickly cool down large batches of soups, stews, etc., and store them in shallow pans. Thaw meats in the refrigerator.
5. Be especially careful of higher risk foods, such as raw

eggs. Eating cookie dough is probably not a wise idea, and neither is drinking homemade eggnog if the eggs used have not been pasteurized (find more tips on safe eggnog).

For further information, visit www.foodsafety.gov.

This article was written by Teresa Hunsaker, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences educator, 801-399-8200

Resetting Your Holiday Expectations

We're well into December, and holiday stress is mounting. Take a moment to reset your expectations for a happier holiday season.

While the holidays are still magical for children and some truly embrace the spirit of the season, most people find the holiday season just adds stress to their already busy life routine. Common concerns include worry about paying for gifts, finding time for all the extra festive activities, and for

some, just trying to seem happy for the next month or two when they really just feel overwhelmed and tired. If that is how you feel, just know that you are not a Scrooge. In fact, you are very normal and very much in the majority. In fact, research suggests that the *pressure to be happy* can actually lead to sadness and even depression during the holidays.

With this in mind, take the time to reset the holiday expectations meter for yourself and your family. Consider these seven tips to creating a happier holiday.

1. **Don't idealize the holidays**. Real life is not a Norman Rockwell painting. The more you try to live up to that kind of expectation, the more frustrated, disappointed and unhappy you are likely to be with yourself and others.
2. **Accept people for who they are**. Before being with family and friends this season, take a few moments and acknowledge what you wish they were like and how you would like them to act. Now, let that image go. Expecting others to be anything but themselves is unrealistic and will mostly likely increase stress.
3. **Recreate traditions.** Traditions are wonderful ways to create memories and bring families close together, but traditions also often need to change over time. Take time to discuss your favorite traditions, and then plan only those traditions that best fit your current life circumstances and bring you joy.
4. **Set boundaries**. Decide as a family how you will spend your time and money this holiday season. Don't forget to schedule in some "down time" so you don't get overburdened with activities. Once limits have been set, you might discover that holiday activities and time with extended family become much more enjoyable.
5. **Take care of yourself.** It's easy to get out of the habit of exercising, eating healthy and getting enough sleep

during the holiday season. Don’t take the season off from your workout routine during the holidays. Going to the gym regularly not only helps you burn the excess calories you consume from holiday feasting, it’s also a great way to relieve stress and improve self-esteem. Activities involving the whole family can also be a great tradition. In addition to exercise, be sure to take time to relax and rejuvenate so you can stay healthy and keep your spirits high.

6. **Focus on the moment**. Even after setting boundaries, it can be easy to get overwhelmed. Slow down and enjoy where you are in that moment. If you feel tense, take a deep breath and take in what you are experiencing with all of your senses. Take a mental snapshot to create memories for the future. Remember, even the frustrating moments might make you laugh in the future.
7. **Take time to reflect and focus on the positive**. Take some time to think about all of the positive things that have happened in the past year. Reflect on accomplishments, goals you or your family members have achieved or positive changes that have been made – no matter how small. Capture some of these reflections in a journal so you can remember them for years to come. If you want to go above and beyond (no pressure!), send a brief email or letter to share your reflections with loved ones.

This article was written by Naomi Brower, Utah State University Extension professor

---

When Is Enough, Enough? Planning for the Holidays

LIVE WELL UTAH

ASK AN EXPERT: WHEN IS ENOUGH, ENOUGH?

Planning for the Holidays

Take a moment this holiday season to check in as a family and eliminate excess in your life.

We all know it is easy to get a little carried away with "decking our halls," and the concepts of excess, over indulgence and over scheduling come to mind during the holiday season more than ever. In general, however, there is a trend toward excess in our lives.

What messages are we sending to our children? When is enough, enough for them, and for us?

Here is a checklist of questions to ask ourselves:

- Are we spending a disproportionate amount of family income on any one category…i.e., clothing, entertainment, child enrichment (lessons, sports, etc.)?
- Are we spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy in any one or two activities? Sports, screen time, cell phones, social media? William Doherty, in his book, The Intentional Family, warns that many families are over scheduled outside the family and under scheduled inside the family.
- As a parent, are you keeping your child from learning age-appropriate developmental tasks by doing things for them, or taking care of things for them that they should be learning to do themselves? Examples include: picking up their own toys, doing their own laundry, paying for some things with their own money, learning to cook, etc.)

A few signs of over indulgence include: trouble learning to delay gratification; trouble giving up being the center of attention; trouble being competent in everyday life skills, including self-care and relationship skills; trouble taking personal responsibility – feeling like it's always someone else's fault; and trouble knowing what is normal.

As a result of over indulgence, kids have come to regard overload as normal, and anything less is boring. In contrast to this is a term coming to the forefront called “creative deprivation.” Parents are coming to understand that kids can have too much of a good thing, so they place limitations on it.

An example from an article in “The Tightwad Gazette” outlines this concept nicely. On a recent trip to the mall, children ordered junior ice cream cones and consumed them in complete silence, savoring every bite. Many parents, seeing their children appreciate junior cones, would start buying them cones on every trip to the mall. Then, seeing their kids’ enthusiasm waning, would assume they must “wow” them with banana splits. When those no longer produced the desired effect, they would move up to the jumbo deluxe sundaes, and on and on, until the kids become impossible to please.

When there is diminished appreciation, it is a sign that children have had too much of something. Instead of moving up to the banana splits, we need to, instead, decrease the frequency of the junior cone. We have habituated a certain level of expectation without appreciation. Another example of this is how frequently we go out to eat. It is no longer a treat, but a norm.

Here are four rules of creative deprivation to consider as we move into the holiday season:

1. Limit things your kids don’t need, but do not limit the things they do need, such as good nutrition and parental attention.
2. Provide them with creative alternatives to substitute for passive entertainment and “no brainer” play.
3. Limit screen time, including cell phones, TV/video time and gaming. This will decrease the stimulation overload in their lives.
4. Set boundaries, and provide rules and limits in all

aspects of your child’s life.

Maybe it is time for all of us to take a step back and evaluate our own lives. Are we needing increasingly more expensive gadgets, clothing, vacations, foods or other stimulating events to keep us happy?

Creative deprivation may be just the ticket. Not only will it save money, but the simplification will also reduce stress levels and increase quality of life.

This article was written by Teresa Hunsaker, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences educator, 801-399-8200, Teresa.hunsaker@usu.edu

Sources:

Clarke, J.I.; Dawson, C.; Bredehoft, D. How Much is Enough? Marlow and Company. 2004.

Tightwad Gazette article by Amy Dacyczyn

Nine Tips for Fostering Gratitude – During the Holidays and Beyond

ASK AN EXPERT: FOSTERING GRATITUDE *for the holidays*

LIVE WELL UTAH

Thanksgiving may be over, but we can still foster gratitude within our families through the rest of the holiday season and beyond. Try these tips to get started.

What did you get for Christmas? This question is common for young and old alike. While it may be a way of showing genuine interest and sharing in the holiday excitement, it's important to make sure gratitude for gifts and kindness is part of Christmas day and beyond.

Gratitude is a character trait based on a genuine sense of caring. It usually goes beyond a simple thank you, although that can be a good place to start. Genuine thankfulness requires thought and action in order to be mutually beneficial to the giver and receiver.

Gail Innis from Michigan State University Extension, states that real gratitude or a sense of thankfulness begins when we are able to recognize and point out small things that make us thankful. Adults can model the behavior through daily words and actions, starting early with young children. For example: "Dad works so hard for our family. Why don't we make him a special meal to show him how much we appreciate him?"

Innis provides additional ways to develop an attitude of gratitude by citing references from The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation website: (https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/kindness-ideas).

1. Discuss a gift your child received during the holidays. Ask what the child liked about it. Talk about the gift giver and how nice it is to be remembered and appreciated by someone.
2. Have your child draw a picture or write a note of thanks. Share how good it feels to get a note or letter in the mail. Assist your child, depending on age and developmental stage, in addressing and mailing the note.

Putting feelings on paper can make them more real for a child.

3. Make a thank you phone or video call to the gift giver. Encourage your child to talk about the gift and share how he or she will use it.
4. Involve your children in local charitable events. Stay informed about community endeavors that help those less fortunate. Discuss upcoming events and brainstorm ways your family could assist. Include your children in a discussion about the charity you'd like to support and why. Even a very young child can assist in choosing a toy for a holiday toy drive.
5. Read stories about generous people and characters. The book, "The Giving Tree," by Shel Silverstein, might be a way to open a conversation about the attitude of gratitude. In "Have You Filled a Bucket Today?" author Carol McCloud tells of an easy way to teach children the power of affirming words and actions.
6. Take advantage of winter days by helping your children clean out old toys, books and clothing they no longer use. Talk about how much other children will appreciate these items. Some local thrift stores, pantries or organizations will even deliver donations. Be certain to check ahead for rules on what the group will take for distribution.
7. Have a Saturday family baking day and prepare packages of homemade items. These can be shared with elderly neighbors or a service provider such as the mail carrier, a bus driver or teacher.
8. Pay attention to people who display generosity and kindness. Point them out to your child. For example, "Wasn't it nice of daddy to help grandma on with her heavy winter coat?" Or, "Did you see that man pick up the litter someone dropped in the park?" Say thank you out loud when someone opens a door for you, lets you cut in front of them in the check-out line or does any other kind act.

9. Take time each day at dinner or bedtime to mention one thing you are thankful for. (See:http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/teaching_an_attitude_of_gratitude_to_young_children)

Creating a feeling of gratitude that lasts beyond the holidays takes effort but is well worth it. Repetition and guidance from parents and loving adults are important keys to instilling gratitude in children.

This article was written by Kathleen Riggs, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor, Kathleen.riggs@usu.edu, 435-586-8132

---

25 Holiday Money Wasters

LIVE WELL UTAH

25 HOLIDAY MONEY WASTERS *to avoid*

Make the most of your Christmas budget and avoid these 25 holiday money wasters.

It can't hurt to spend a little extra during the holidays because, "Tis the Season." Right? Wrong…it can and does hurt. No matter how caught up in the spirit of Christmas you may get, being wise and careful is the name of the game to keep your finances in good standing when January rolls around. Avoid these 25 holiday money wasters.

1. **Shopping without a budget.** Before you make any purchases, figure out how much you can afford to spend, stick to your budget and track your spending. Don't make purchases you haven't budgeted for.
2. **Not sharing the cost of entertaining.** While it is tempting to just cover all of the costs yourself, share your entertaining costs with guests by assigning them such things as food, paper products and game supplies.
3. **Putting purchases on a credit card.** Most of us tend to overspend when using a credit card. We are also less likely to do as much price comparison when we think we will just get it now and be done, then pay for it later. We rationalize that the few extra dollars aren't that big of a deal breaker.
4. **Using out-of-network ATMs when shopping.** Those fees can add up, so plan carefully.
5. **Shopping at the last minute.** This can be a tricky one. Sometimes in a rush, we buy too much and spend too much. With that said, sometimes there are still some "perfect" items at a great price later in the game. The trouble is, things are generally picked over, and the frustration may not be worth the savings.
6. **Buying "little" gifts for too many people.** In fact, consider an alternative to gift exchanges. Determine a set amount that you donate to a charity, then tell all those would- be-recipients of your gift what you have

done.

7. **Buying party supplies at grocery stores.** Try discount stores and dollar stores for the majority of your party supply needs.
8. **Not comparing prices.** There are a number of great ways to check prices on things, so use them – they are free. Some websites/apps include: www.fatwallet.com (they even have a Black Friday app); www.pricehistories.com; www.consumerworld.org; www.pricegrabber.com.
9. **Buying new decorations every year.** Cut back on the decorations this year, and use last year's decorations as much as possible. Get creative and put some time and effort into making decorations.
10. **Getting new holiday clothes.** We don't need new holiday attire for a family photo, gathering or night out. Learn how to dress up the basics…like a black dress that can be used many times with just a simple switch of less expensive accessories.
11. **Not taking advantage of free activities.**
12. **Buying too many specialty foods or drinks.** Carefully plan menus for simple and economical meals for the majority of your holiday dining. Also, carefully plan your special occasion meals watching for sales.
13. **Not shopping a year in advance**, when things are considerably reduced at the end of each season.
14. **Not using coupons.** This time of year there are some really good deals and promotions…so if there are discounts on items on your list, don't pass them up. Try www.retailmenot.com for online discount codes at checkout.
15. **Buying overpriced wrapping paper** just to make your gifts look "extra special."
16. **Splurging on meals away from home**, or tipping too much when you do go out.
17. **Paying for warranties on appliances and electronics.** Odds are that you won't need the extra coverage because most major appliances don't break down during the

extended-warranty period. Or you might already be covered. The four major credit card networks – Visa, MasterCard, Discover and American Express – provide up to a year of extended warranty protection for some cardholders, according to credit card comparison site www.cardhub.com.

18. **Not clearly planning your charitable contributions.** We all want to help out those in need during the holidays, but we usually either go overboard, don't plan a set amount or get carried away with everyone who approaches us for help. This can add up quickly.
19. **Paying full price for gift cards.** It is possible to find gift cards at a discount. Try these sites www.giftcardgranny.com or www.cardkangaroo.com for up to 50 percent savings sometimes.
20. **Buying "bad" gifts.** Be thoughtful well in advance regarding gifts you plan on giving.
21. **Going overboard on your kids.** It is an easy thing to do, out of desire to make the season magical and a desire to grant their every wish, but be careful. Stay the course on your predetermined amount of money available for gifts, and live within the reality of your budget.
22. **Running too many errands through poor planning**.
23. **Paying too much for shipping.** Try www.freeshipping.org for shipping coupons and the date for free shipping for online purchases this holiday season.
24. **Spending too much on greeting cards.** There are many places to access e-cards. Or better yet, design your own letter/card in a simple program, and send it electronically. You will save on postage and cards.
25. **Buying for yourself.** While you may be worth it, no matter how good the deal, pass it up. On average we spend about $130 on ourselves during the holidays, according to the National Retail Federation. So be careful…that is a lot of money. Imagine what an impact that extra money will make on your gift list. Only a couple more weeks of abstaining from unnecessary

personal purchases and you can get back into the swing of spending on yourself at the first of the year – if you have the money.

This article was written by Teresa Hunsaker, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences educator, teresa.hunsaker@usu.edu, (801) 399-8200

---

6 Tips for Holiday Spending Plus GIVEAWAY

ASK AN EXPERT: SIX TIPS FOR HOLIDAY SPENDING

LIVE WELL UTAH

Do you have a Christmas budget or spending plan? Here are some tips to help you keep your holiday spending in check. ***Don't forget to check out the giveaway link at the end of the post!***

Consumers spent $658.3 billion dollars on the holidays last year. Determining how much to spend on Christmas can be a tricky decision. Financial planners advise us to spend no more than 1.5 percent of our income on holiday expenses. So if you made $50K, you'd want to stay under $750 for total holiday spending. If you love the holiday, as I do, but do not want to be paying for it in May, here are a few things to consider now:

1. **Stick to it:** Focusing on your gift-giving budget is one of the easiest ways to control holiday spending on your terms. Set a total spending limit on gifts. You will want to thoroughly think through the gifts you buy. If it helps you stay within your spending budget, suggest a gift exchange with family members, coworkers, neighbors, etc. Draw names instead of buying gifts for each person.

2. **Divvy it up:** Once you've determined how much to spend on Christmas based on the recommended 1.5 percent, divide up the total among the people you need to buy gifts for, the holiday food extras you need, etc. Finish the spending plan before you start shopping, and keep track of the spending as you go along. There are plenty of Christmas gift budgeting apps on iOS and Android to help. Pick one with high customer ratings and use it to keep your spending plan updated as you go.

3. **Set it aside:** If you are spending $8 to $10 each day for lunch, pack your lunch and save that money in a separate account for Christmas expenses. Over the next four weeks, that could add up to $200.

4. **Shop it smart:** We are all familiar with Black Friday and Cyber Monday (the Monday following Black Friday, is referred to as Cyber Monday, when online retailers offer great deals often including free shipping). These major shopping events are designed to make you spend more! Take advantage of the sales but be ready to go with your gift list and buy only what you know you need. Stick to the list so you do not overspend.

5. **Power Shop it:** Find someone to watch the kids during the day (to avoid the nighttime shopping crowd) and plan a power shopping day where you tackle your entire gift shopping list in one day. Make sure you do not shop on an empty stomach! Take your list and stick to it! Then enjoy time with your family making holiday memories while everyone else is stressing about last-minute gifts.

6. **Get Creative:** You do not have to sacrifice that personal touch because you are spending cautiously. There are many ways to reduce expenditures and still give appreciated gifts. Non-monetary gifts are a fabulous way to keep costs down. Homemade gifts are often more meaningful. Coupons or certificates for service or quality time are a great way to share talents and make memories.

Stick to these 6 tips and you'll be a lot less flustered as you check off your holiday gift-buying list. Between now and December 8th **I'm giving away three Amazon Echo 2nd Generation Smart devices** to help you check off your gift list! If you'd like a chance to win one, click the link below for the details.

ENTER GIVEAWAY

This article was written by Amanda Christensen, Extension Assistant Professor for Utah State University. Follow her on Twitter: @FamFinPro, Facebook: Fam Fin Pro, Instagram: @FamFinPro.

Five Tips for Food Safety at Holiday Buffets

ASK AN EXPERT:

FIVE TIPS

FOR FOOD SAFETY AT HOLIDAY BUFFETS

LIVE WELL UTAH

With Thanksgiving just around the corner, try these tips for food safety at your upcoming holiday gatherings.

The aromas of holiday foods often bring to mind the sweet memories of years past. Whether a large family gathering, office party or potluck, the holidays are filled with traditional foods that bring people together. On the other hand, there may be in your memory a time where the result of such a gathering left you nauseous, vomiting or worse because of an episode of food-borne illness.

Let’s take a closer look at buffets, whether at a restaurant or any type of gathering, and be aware of how to avoid becoming ill for the holidays. Following a few general tips should help keep you protected.

1.) Take time to be cautious and observant. If you are invited to be a guest at a buffet-style luncheon or dinner served at a family, community, work or church gathering, be cautious up front. Do a quick review of what food is available and how it is being kept hot or cold.

Ask yourself a few questions: Does the food look fresh? Do I trust that the person preparing the food had clean hands and avoided cross-contamination with raw meats or meat juices? Has the food been held at a safe temperature? The Food Safety Inspection Service specifies that hot food should be held at 140 F or warmer and cold food should be held at 40 F or colder. They also note that using the same knives and cutting surfaces to prepare a variety of foods is the main source of cross contamination leading to food-borne illness.

2.) Notice how the food is being kept hot or cold. It is very important that food at a buffet is kept hot with chafing dishes, slow cookers and warming trays and that food that requires refrigeration is kept cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice or small serving trays that are replaced often.

If hot foods are not in a container keeping the food steaming hot using electrical power, an insulated chest or Sterno® burners, it is very difficult to keep foods at a safe temperature for more than 30 minutes. This is true for any low-acid food like vegetables, meats, soups, casseroles, etc.

Depending on the temperature of the room, foods containing dairy may only remain at 40 F or colder for a few minutes. As food temperatures approach room temperature, bacteria can thrive. Perishable foods should not be left at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

3.) Know which foods are likely to be sources of food-borne illness. Dishes with meat, meat juices, dairy, potatoes, corn and squash are especially prone to carry food-borne pathogens if not cooked thoroughly and held at a sufficient high temperature. These foods are “dense” and are difficult to heat to the center, and they also chill quickly when stored in large quantities. So, if there is any doubt as to whether the food is fresh or has been stored and reheated, be extra cautious. Keep in mind that populations especially vulnerable to illness include the elderly and young children.

4.) Be aware of food-borne illnesses and symptoms. A worst-case scenario would be to eat food containing botulism spores that could lead to death. Most illnesses, however, are caused by Clostridium perfringens, often referred to as the “cafeteria germ” because it may be found in foods served in quantity and left for long periods of time on inadequately maintained steam tables or at room temperature. The toxins cause abdominal pain and stomach cramps, followed by diarrhea. These symptoms last around 24 hours, and while uncomfortable, they are rarely fatal.

Listeria monocytogenes, another food-borne illness, is caused when bacteria multiply slowly at refrigeration temperatures. To avoid serving foods containing *Listeria*, carefully follow “keep refrigerated” and “use by” directions, and thoroughly

reheat frozen or refrigerated processed meat and poultry products before consumption. Symptoms include fever, muscle aches and sometimes nausea or diarrhea. If infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance or convulsions can occur.

5.) Follow guidelines if you plan to take home leftovers. Divide cooked foods into shallow containers to store in the refrigerator or freezer until serving. This encourages rapid, even cooling. Reheat hot foods to 165 F. Arrange and serve food on several small platters rather than on one large platter. Keep the rest of the food hot in the oven (set at 200-250 F) or cold in the refrigerator until serving time. This way foods will be held at a safe temperature for a longer period of time. Replace empty platters rather than adding fresh food to a dish that already had food in it. Many people's hands may have been taking food from the dish, which has also been sitting out at room temperature.

Short of avoiding buffets all together (which some food safety experts endorse), a little common sense and personal hand hygiene can help you avoid becoming sick from any number of communicable diseases. Carry and use hand sanitizer before eating. If you wash your hands in the restroom, use a paper towel to turn off faucets and to open the door as you leave.

This article was written by Kathleen Riggs, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor, kathleen.riggs@usu.edu, 435-586-8132