

# Common Holiday Stressors in Children

## *And Research-Based Ways to Support Them*

*Practical tools you can use to help kids manage stress, anxiety, and big feelings during the holidays.*



### 1. Disrupted Routines & Loss of Structure

The most universal holiday stressor. Impacts sleep, behavior, attention, and mood for nearly all kids



### Create a “Holiday Lite Schedule.”

A simplified visual schedule (wake time, meals, one activity, downtime, bedtime) preserves predictability and reduces anxiety.



### Practice a brief nightly “preview & plan.”



Ask: “What’s one thing happening tomorrow, and what’s one thing you can do to make it smoother?” This builds anticipatory coping and cognitive preparation.



### 2. Academic Pressure Before the Break

Almost all school-aged kids experience heightened academic stress right before the holiday break.



### Break tasks into micro-steps (CBT behavioral activation).

Kids’ stress drops when they see work divided into tiny, doable pieces.



### Use the “Two Good Strategies” coping plan. CBT problem-solving:



- What’s the problem?
- What are two strategies?
- Which will I try first?



### 3. Anticipatory Social Anxiety (events, family gatherings, performances)

Very common—performances, parties, family events, and unfamiliar situations trigger anxiety.



### Teach coping scripts. CBT reframing:

- “I can handle feeling nervous.”
- “I only need to get through the first 5 minutes.”



### Practice “mini exposures” at home.



5–10 minute role-plays of greetings, eye contact, or answering common relative questions.



#### 4. Conflictual or Unpredictable Environments

Frequent in families with high stress, travel, or complicated dynamics.



#### Teach the STOP skill (CBT/DBT).

- Stop
  - Take a breath
  - Observe
  - Proceed mindfully
- Helps prevent emotional flooding.



#### Set pre-agreed signals with parents.

A subtle signal (“hand tap” or “shoulder squeeze”) that means “I need a break” empowers kids without escalating conflict.



#### 5. Grief, Loss, Divorce, and Family Changes

Not universal, but very common among kids who have experienced loss, divorce, or major transitions.



#### Use “mixed emotion labeling.”

Help kids articulate:  
“I can feel sad about Grandpa and still enjoy parts of the holiday.”  
Evidence-based for grief processing.



#### Create small rituals of remembrance.

Rituals reduce emotional overload—lighting a candle, sharing a memory, or writing a note.



#### 6. Feeling Overwhelmed by Travel, Changes, New Environments

Present in many children, especially those with rigidity or anxiety, but not as universal as top items.



#### Teach grounding exercises.

The 5-4-3-2-1 sensory scan, square breathing, or “find 3 things that feel safe.”



#### Build “transition rituals.”

A 3-step ritual before entering a new place (breathe, squeeze a stress ball, say a coping script) reduces distress and improves flexibility.

Supporting children, teens, and families with evidence-based care.

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**DR. ARYEH BERLIN**  
NJ LICENSE #35SI00626800  
NY LICENSE #025390  
*Director*

201.639.4669

[office@weallaspire.com](mailto:office@weallaspire.com)

345 NJ-17 Suite 44, Upper Saddle River, NJ

[www.weallaspire.com](http://www.weallaspire.com)