

Hard Holidays with your Child of Trauma

By Robyn Gobbel

Christmas is over, but for most families Winter Break from school has only just begun. December is oftentimes a month of ‘unpredictable’ and ‘out-of-the-ordinary’ as we attend church and school pageants and parties, hire extra baby-sitters to go shopping and to our work Christmas party, veer off our routine to watch Christmas movies and stay up late, and have extra guests come in and out of our home. With Christmas out of the way, many families are now feeling the fall-out from the hustle and bustle of the holiday season and may find themselves wondering “WHY?!” Why do things that are special get ruined? Why does my child sulk and act entitled when we stress giving and graciousness in our family? Why is my kid in time-out before 7:30am on Christmas morning?

I read a comment on a popular ‘trauma parenting’ blog today that stated that the WHY of behavior isn’t important- it’s only important what we do in the moment to respond to the maladaptive behavior. I vehemently disagree that the WHY isn’t important and have already started writing another article that addresses this statement. For today, I want to offer you a few different suggestions that may be related to your child’s WHY.

Lack of routine- The holiday season inevitability contributes to a lack of routine, but this is only magnified once school lets out for winter break. Children with a trauma history thrive on structure and routine. The predictability helps them feel safe and lowers a bit of the activation in their nervous system. When life becomes unpredictable, little nervous systems go on high-alert, priming itself to be ready for any danger that may arise. Being on high-alert also causes kiddos to see “DANGER DANGER!!!!” when there isn’t any. “High Alert State” is not known for reading danger accurately.

Sensory Overload- Many of our kids from trauma have a sensitive sensory processing system. This may make excess noise, crowds of people, and bright lights very difficult to manage. This extra sensory input leaves children right at the edge of their “window of tolerance,” meaning that your child may be more easily triggered into dysregulated and maladaptive behavior.

Negative Sense of Self- One of the most debilitating impacts of early childhood trauma is how it decimates a child’s beliefs about themselves. Children who experience abuse, neglect, or other trauma without a strong support system in place start to believe things like “I am a bad kid,” “I only deserve bad things” and “I cannot trust adults.” Being offered good things- like holiday gifts or fun family experiences- puts kids in conflict with their inner world. Our body and brain likes to stay in equilibrium- even if the equilibrium is negative. Kids may unconsciously solicit experiences or relationships that validate their negative beliefs. Unfortunately, these negative beliefs are their normal, safe, and comfortable.

Trigger Past Memories- The holiday season can trigger both implicit and explicit memories in our kiddos. I think most adults can empathize with this. How many of us navigate through the

holidays without ever feeling a glimmer of sadness or regret, either remembering happy memories that are no longer present at the holidays, or sad memories of holiday experiences you'd rather forget? Our children may be having similar holiday experiences. The holidays may heighten feelings of sadness and missing their first family. The holidays can also trigger negative memories through some of the distinct sounds and smells that December brings about.

The holidays are hard for many of us- but they can be extra challenging for your child who has a history of trauma. Slow down, limit sensory input, and stay in a routine as much as possible.

Here's to a calm and blessed 2013!

Robyn Gobbel, LCSW

written: December 27, 2012

***Robyn Gobbel, LCSW** is a child and family therapist in Austin, Texas specializing in adoption, trauma, and attachment counseling. <https://gobbelcounseling.wordpress.com/>*