

## 6 Ways to Manage Tantrums, Misbehavior and Meltdowns During the Holidays

By Megan Devine, LCPC



If you have a child or teen who misbehaves, the holidays can be a source of infinite stress and anxiety. Your individual expectations of the holidays can be seriously at odds: you expect to have a nice, shared time with your whole family and maybe attend some larger family gatherings; they expect to get every gift they demand, and they intend to spend their school break staying up late, sleeping in, and playing video games. The resulting holiday season can be filled with tantrums, obnoxious behavior, and lots of yelling and screaming.

As an added stress, what is normally behavior just seen by your own family unit can suddenly be on display for everyone. Sometimes you might even feel like it's just better for everyone if you skip those family events because you don't want your own parents or your in-laws to see how out of control things have become.

(No wonder a lot of parents dread the holidays!)

### The Root of Bad Behavior (Might Not Be What You Think)

Family gatherings and the holidays are times when inappropriate child behavior is felt most acutely by parents. But do kids really act out more during this time of year? And if so, what's going on?

Let's look at this through something James Lehman talks about in his *Total Transformation Program*: the idea that kids act out when they don't know how to solve their problems. The holidays can give all of us a lot more problems to solve, (to put it mildly) and maybe that's why behavioral problems can seem more intense during these months. For example, let's say your son doesn't want to go to Grandma's house for dinner. He's angry about having to go, and he pitches a fit. There's a problem ("I'm angry") and he solves that problem using a tool he hopes might work (yell and stomp so I don't have to go).

Sometimes it's the break in routine that sets a kid off, or the holiday excitement or expectation, and they simply don't know how to handle that energy. Or for younger kids, there's anxiety about doing something right or wrong to get this toy or that game. But when kids don't know how to handle their problems in appropriate ways, they'll use every inappropriate "trick" in the book.

One way kids try to solve their problems is by being obnoxious. The truth is, obnoxious behavior often works, in that we give in to what our kids want just to make them stop behaving that way, or go away. After all, kids do what works. James Lehman really stresses the idea of "intermittent reinforcement" – that if you sometimes give in to misbehavior, then that behavior becomes a tool your kid will use again and again, in hopes that this will be one of those times that it works. (Sort of like people who play the slot machine. If you're rewarded once every hundred times, it will still convince you to keep trying, because you're hanging out for that jackpot. Kids treat parents the same way at times.)

Remember that no matter what the issue is, at its core, your child has a problem he is trying to solve: whether that problem is not wanting to spend a holiday dinner with extended family, or having an intense need for that new video game. Does yelling solve the problem? He might think, "If I get mad and throw things, will that keep me from having to go to church with my parents tonight? If it worked once, I'm going to try it again."

Do you see how that works? James Lehman calls this "anger with an angle." Not only do some kids use emotional outbursts to solve their anger or irritation, they also *train* their parents to be extra careful around them, so as not to "set them off." In this way, they are trying to solve the problem of anger (or discomfort, or irritation) by getting what they want every single time: eventually, they only have to threaten an outburst to get their way.

### **Walking on Eggshells around Your Child?**

If you find yourself walking on eggshells around your child just to keep things quiet, you're not alone. Sometimes, you're just plain tired, and giving in feels like the easiest solution. Starting right now, though, you can begin to take your power back and stop tiptoeing around your child.

Whatever the problem is, remember that your role as a parent is to help her learn appropriate ways to solve her problems, and to hold her accountable for her behavior. Your rules and expectations help her build the skills she needs to be successful in life. Learning to control your temper when things

don't go your way is a huge skill that many people don't learn as kids, and still struggle with as adults. It doesn't matter if obnoxious behavior is a once-a-year problem or a constant daily struggle. The reality is that kids need to learn how to solve their problems in appropriate ways – all year round.

If your child's behavior gets out of control around the holidays, here are some things you might try:

- **Stick with your routine as much as possible.** Sometimes just keeping the familiar rhythm of life can help lessen the anxiety that can come with excitement and over-stimulation. As much as possible, try to stick to your normal routine.
- **Be clear about your family's approach to the holidays:** Go over the rules and expectations before you get into a tough situation. This might include how you will handle requests for certain things, what you expect in terms of attendance at family events, etc.
- **Work in things your child actually wants:** Let her know there is time for her interests during the school break, as well. You might even ask your child what their "ideal" holiday would be. Are there places you can compromise?

### **Defiant Kids: Tantrums, Angry Outbursts, and Yelling**

But what if you have a child who has angry outbursts, meltdowns and is generally hard to manage? What can you do to lessen your anxiety, manage their behavior, and work toward better behavior – even during the holidays?

First, keep that mantra running in your head: "He's trying to solve a problem." If you can speak to the problem underneath his negative behavior, you can respond more calmly – and therefore, more effectively.

Remember that the heat of the moment is *not* the time to discuss your expectations, or the consequences your child will face if those expectations are not met. If you've lived through enough holiday seasons with your child to know how they typically react, you can plan ahead. Sit down with your child and be clear and direct about what you need to see happen this year.

1. **Be clear about your expectations; be clear about the rules.** You can issue a calm statement like, "Just because you don't want to go tonight doesn't mean you get to throw things and yell at me. I know you're not happy about going to Grandma's for dinner. This is something we're

going to do as a family, and you'll need to find appropriate ways to handle your irritation."

2. **Self-control is a skill.** Help your child identify the things she *can* do to manage her feelings, not just the things she *can't* do. Give her some examples, and encourage her to come up with some of her own. Self-control is a skill, and like any other, it can be learned and needs to be practiced as much as possible. Give your child the opportunity to practice this skill in small, bite-sized pieces if possible.
3. **Build in a reward.** Remember that your child is motivated by what he wants, not by what *you* want. Help your child practice new skills by tying it to something he wants. It doesn't need to be a big thing, it just needs to be something he personally cares about.
4. **Don't threaten.** While it's tempting to tell your child that he won't get any gifts, that approach is not effective in changing behavior. Don't take away anything that can't be earned back. (For more on effective consequences, [click here](#).)
5. **Keep your own temper in check.** Kids know how to push your buttons. As James and Janet Lehman say, "Kids watch you for a living; that's their job. And they know what works!" Try to take a deep breath before you react. Not only will you help yourself stay calm, but you're also modeling self-control for your child. Show them how it's done! This is a good way to take good care of yourself during the holiday season (and beyond).
6. **When things do get heated, walk away.** Remember that arguing during an angry outburst only adds fuel to the fire. But because you have prepared in advance, you can simply state your expectation, prompt your child to calm themselves down, and then walk away.

It may take a while, but through your calm, clear role modeling, your child will learn that angry outbursts are not going to solve his problem.

The truth is, change is hard, and it's going to take time. The sooner you begin to hold your child accountable for their behavior by helping them learn - and practice - better problem-solving skills, the better off your family will be. This will give your family a fantastic foundation for all the years to come.

## About Megan Devine, LCPC

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Megan Devine is a licensed clinical therapist, a former Parental Support Line Advisor, a speaker, and writer. She is also the bonus-parent to a successfully launched young man. You can find more of her work at [www.refugeingrief.com](http://www.refugeingrief.com), where she advocates for new ways to live with grief.