

Chemical Education Specialists

Lee Soderlind, B.A., LADC
Gayle Knopik, M.A. LADC

Counselors

Katy Berglund, M.A.
Sara Belleau, M.A.
Jessalin Karsnia, M.A.

Counselors

Mary Oppegaard, M.A.
Pamela A. Anderson, M.A.
Tami Langlois, M.A.
Deanna Lilienthal, M.A.
Molly Fischer, M.S.E.

Counselors

Rebecca Lunderby, M.A.
Ana Carter, MBA
Paul Gasner, M.A.
Heidi Wessman, M.A.
Sarah Kelly, M.A.

Holidays, vacations and expectations

Some families get carried away with the commercial aspects of the holiday season, but many manage to keep the emphasis on faith, generosity and compassion. But even as we resist the worst elements of the holiday season, we have to work to contain our children's expectations. In addition, we have our own work to do to contain the pressure we put on ourselves. If we are unrealistic about our expectations, we might think it is urgent for us to create the perfect holiday season and add to our own stress levels unnecessarily.

The purposeful setting of expectations is an important life skill. However, it is a skill that we do not automatically learn the day we become a parent. I meet many adults who either never learned how to set expectations in a healthy way, or never learned they are even allowed to set expectations in the first place.

For example, if we set our expectations unrealistically high when we go on a family vacation (every campsite will be next to a babbling brook, ski conditions will be perfect every day, every meal in every restaurant will be perfect), we are setting ourselves up to be disappointed. We could end up with good meals, good skiing and decent campsites, but instead of feeling pleased, we might end up feeling stressed and disappointed. The variable is not always what happens to us on vacation or during the holiday season, but what we decide we need in order to feel satisfied.

I met with a parent a few years ago who told me that it helped her to think about expectations as if we had (inside of us) an "Expectations Dial" marked "Open" at one end and "Closed" on the other. When she was able to keep the dial set to "Open," she was able to experience the day as it unfolded. And on those days she felt less stressed. The days she was

most stressed were the days when her dial was set to “Closed.” This makes sense because those were the times when she needed the days to unfold exactly the way she wanted them to in order to feel satisfied. The holidays offer us a wonderful opportunity to practice keeping the “Expectations Dial” set to “Open.”

Can you tell when you are setting your “Expectations Dial” or does it feel as if it is something that just happens? Even though it may feel a bit unnatural at first, it helps to build a moment into each day (preferably early in the day) to do a quick check. You might remind yourself to be open to the day, get as much done as you can, and to be content with whatever you leave for another day. Your children will benefit more from watching you enjoy the holiday season than they will by watching you become stressed trying to create the perfect holiday season.

“Open” allows us to be intimately connected with our children and experience whatever the day has in store for us. “Closed” requires the experiences to be under our control. And when we can not control the holiday season, we find ourselves becoming tense and grumpy. While it seems as if the stress or disappointment comes from the experiences themselves, it is usually our attempts to control them that lead to the feelings of stress or disappointment. Even the disappointing times are important, even necessary, and they provide great teaching opportunities. After all, it is by watching us deal with our disappointments and our stress that our children learn to deal with the disappointments and stress that will inevitably come their way.

Suspending expectations by remembering to set the “Expectations Dial” to “Open” is not only a great strategy for the holiday season and for vacations, it is helpful year-round. This holiday season, may you be open to all the experiences that await you and your children.

