

HAPPY SCHOOL HOLIDAYS & WELLBEING

“The only thing I love better than the wonderful low stress first day of the school holidays, is the last day – when I know they are going back tomorrow!”

Whilst school holidays are generally a happy time for families to enjoy together, it's worth being aware that they can place additional pressure on families and potentially on some children and young people's mental health.

THERE ARE SOME SIMPLE STEPS TO TAKE TO REDUCE THIS PRESSURE.

Boost healthy activities: Set reasonable expectations about technology use. If there is too much screen time, the holidays won't be as recharging and health promoting as they could be. Have 90 minutes limits in the morning and then tell them they need to get on with a plan for the day. It's worth noting that police have reported an increase in cyber-bullying during school holidays, so start a conversation about this and be aware of your children's on-line activities.

Connect: Help kids who may feel a bit lonely over the holidays so plan outings to connect with friends. Make meet up plans (parks, BBQs) with other families, or reconnect with relatives, extended families or others. Look-out for local events to make some new and positive community connections.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Be sensitive: If children or young people are experiencing grief or loss, holidays, special events and especially Christmas can be a challenging time. It is important to include them in some creative planning to spend the day in positive ways. They may want to do something special to remember their loved one, or just go on as normal, as established routines can be reassuring.

Keep an eye on them: The recent 2nd Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health & Wellbeing (2015) indicated that 13.9% of children (4-17 years) experienced mental disorders (i.e. depression or anxiety) in the past 12 months: equates to 560,000 children and adolescents, so this isn't rare. Keep the communication lines open, monitor outings and help them do the things that are more likely to help with recovery (social connecting, exercise, good nutrition) without panicking about them.

Pre-empt issues: If they are worried about school: new classes or school, talk about it and help them with an action plan. Do some orientation activities, school grounds visits, check out the playground or look up some information on line together. Then distract them with other creative activities: sand building, tent-making, tree house, creating a special chill-out space in their room or some other crafting or making.

Watch yourself: No surprises, but parental stress can increase over holidays, which can impact on children. This is usually due to parents feeling overloaded or stretched between home and work. Sit down as a family and make a collective calendar. Schedule some movies or fun days out, along with some times when they are cared by others and some independent, quiet times (if appropriate). Stress levels will drop if you have a break from constant

negotiations, event management and oversight of everything. Some self-care and sustenance is really important. Take to the couch with a book, walk with a friend or a coffee catch-up with someone who makes you laugh.

Get them talking: Encourage children to call one another and make arrangements to meet up. As they get older they need to take some responsibility for arranging their play times and letting the adults know the times and locations. This is good communication practise. Use the school holidays as opportunities to let them have some extra responsibilities, e.g. help with shopping or cooking.

Keep tabs on them: You don't have to interfere, but do set expectations so you know where they are at given times. Set some age dependent rules, i.e. leaving notes, locking up the house or calling if they are going out with a friend. Even if you are at work ask them to check in with you throughout the day. Young adolescents will naturally try to take some risks and push boundaries so don't assume the *little angels* are at home just reading books! Keep your eye out or enlist friends and neighbours. Older adolescents also need boundaries that are consistently followed while balancing some freedom.

Maintain healthy routines: Sensible bed times, night-time stories and good nutrition are important. Some holiday 'treats' are ok but letting standards drop too far can cause issues when it's time to resume school and settle down. It's a great time to catch up on sleep and do physical exercise so you all feel genuinely tired at night. Encourage kids to get outside: on their bikes, long walks, swimming and helping with chores or gardening.

Children as carers – acknowledge their workload:

If your child is a carer, as many children are, holidays can be very different for them so try to negotiate some time off for them during the holidays. Ask them what they would enjoy doing and call on friends and family or local services to support their ideas. COPMI is useful for children and *young people who care for someone with mental health issues*. <http://www.copmi.net.au>

Music as medicine: Fill your house with music during the holidays, try some new tunes, make a play list together and start the day with your favourites. This could be a regular holiday tradition. Pump up the volume and have a dance.

Check in: Ask your children every few days how they are feeling? Which activities have they enjoyed and if they need support. *Communication and warmth is the key*. It's not about having fun every minute of the day, it's about rest and replenishment so they are healthy and happy enough to enjoy not being at school.

Small tokens: Children only need small tokens or gestures to feel special and acknowledgment for what they have done. Ask them what they may like and try to buy health promoting gifts (e.g. bikes, trampolines and sports gear are better than video games). Making some oversized cards listing their achievements or some memorable funny moments.

Life is busy, but do your best to take time out to enjoy the holidays. Focus on the good parts and stay positive with your family, remember to ask for help when you need it too.