

## Surviving the Holidays

Just by leading a couple of discussions (or activities that bring out the same information) we can give students coping skills for getting through the holidays. We know that many students function better with the anchor that school can be for them in their lives, so a two-week break can leave them at loose ends. Here are some simple ideas that can reap great benefits for students.

Begin with a statement of the obvious. "When the holidays approach, lots of us have excitement for things to which we look forward, and lots of us also have some things we dread. You know what it is like for you in your home, and you also know what it is like in homes of your friends. It can be quite different. Let's take some time to look at how we all get through the holidays. First let's make a list of all the kinds of things that kids might be looking forward to...." You notice we aren't saying "... that you look forward to..." because we want students to feel free to speak more generally and not have to self-disclose things about their own family. Most of them will, because that is their frame of reference, but the goal is to let them speak as though they might be brainstorming on behalf of others who struggle more than they. Creating this distance between self-disclosure and speaking more philosophically and generally makes it much safer for some students to enter into the conversation. "Let's make a list of the kinds of things that are exciting and fun about holidays." So the first step is to generate that which is safest to approach.

"We also know that some families and some kids have a difficult time at the holidays. There are lots of reasons for that. What are some of the kinds of things that might be difficult for students in America/Our Town?" So now we're generating a list of the board of challenges. That list might include children who are from divorced or separated families who won't have all of their loved ones in the same place at the same time. Those who have parents overseas in the military. Those who are homeless or impoverished. Those whose parents are unhappy or fight. So we acknowledge that there are difficulties for lots of families.

Finally, we ask the kids to help come up with coping skills and ideas. Go through the list. On some (like if the family is separated by divorce or military service) you can come up with ideas about sending pictures, skyping, and any other ways you can stay connected. For kids who have families with challenges like fighting or tension, would it be OK for them to check out library books that they could keep through the whole vacation? Are there activities you can help them come up with that they can do in their rooms so they separate themselves from the stress? Can they play music that is soothing? Come up with the longest list you can with both the students' ideas and add your own toward the end as well.

Other options would be to have the same "assignments" for the lists kids would generate, but let them work in small groups. With younger students, you might have them draw about their solutions.

One of the keys for survival is knowing you aren't alone - that you aren't the only one that has whatever problems you have. It is helpful for kids to hear that others have the same worries and concerns. "Predict and Prepare" is a really helpful concept here - help kids predict what the hard parts might be and help them prepare ahead of time. Sometimes the "prepare" part is what they will do to protect themselves, and other times it is helping them think ahead of time about what they'll say when some particular thing happens. And don't just walk them through the process of Predict and Prepare, tell them about the concept; that thinking ahead of time and identifying problems and then problem-solving ahead of time helps us do better when bad things happen than if we just avoid thinking about them altogether. The goal is to help children recognize that any time they are anxious about something that is about to happen, we're better off to face it and think of solutions before we're in major stress because our brain works better when we aren't yet super stressed. Planning ahead keeps our brain functioning when we need it - when times are tough.

