



Mott Poll Report

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'Tis the Season to be...Stressed?

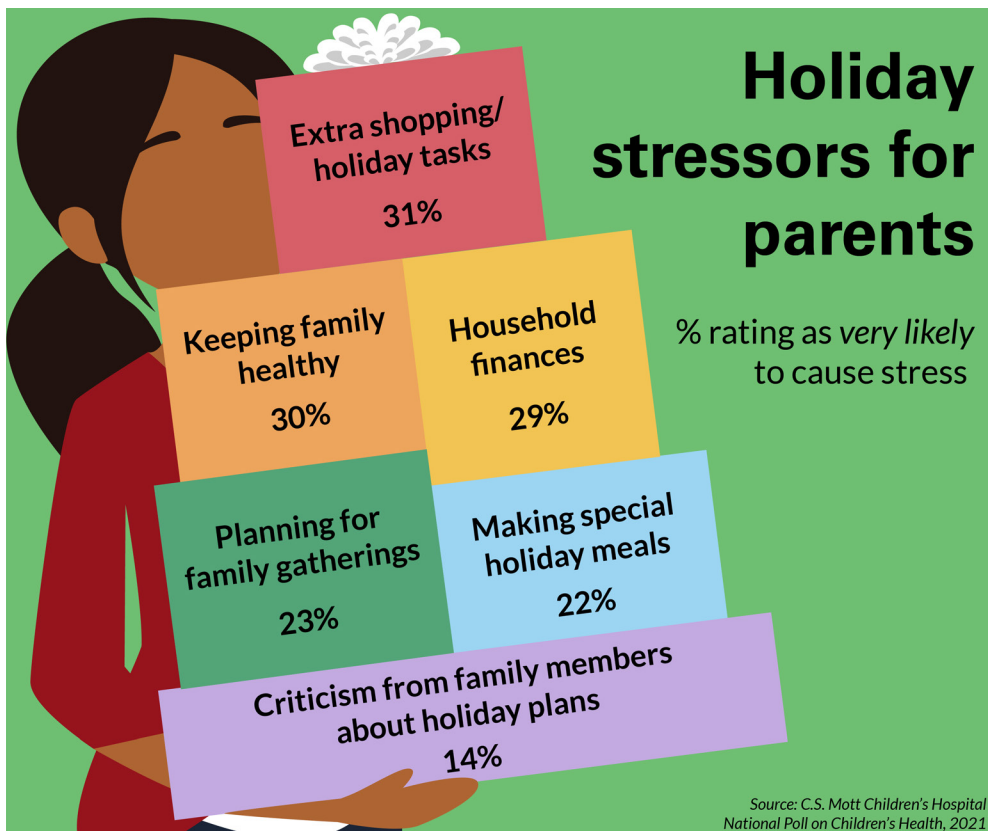
The ideal portrait of the holidays includes happy children gathering with family, opening presents, and carrying on family traditions. However, living up to that ideal can cause stress or anxiety for parents. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents about stress around the holidays.

While nearly all parents (96%) say that the holidays are generally a happy time for their family, 18% rate their stress level as high during the holiday season. Nearly twice as many mothers than fathers (23% vs 12%) report high stress levels during this time. Parents point to several aspects of this holiday season that are very likely to cause them stress, including extra shopping/holiday tasks (31%), keeping family members healthy (30%), household finances (29%), planning for family gatherings (23%), making special holiday meals (22%), and criticism from family members about holiday plans (14%). More mothers than fathers rate each aspect of the holidays as very likely to cause stress.

One in five parents (20%) believe their child has unrealistic expectations for the holiday season, while 1 in 4 parents (28%) feel they have unrealistic expectations of themselves. Overall, 20% of parents acknowledge that their own stress level negatively affects their child's enjoyment of the holidays. Parents who rate their holiday stress level as high are more likely to report a negative impact for their child, compared to those who rate their holiday stress level as medium or low.

Parents report the most effective ways to reduce their holiday stress are time alone (71%), listening to music (55%), exercise (46%), prayer/religious services (28%), getting help from other family members (23%) and work (15%). More mothers say help from family members reduces their stress, while more fathers look to work as a way to reduce their stress.

Among parents of children in school, 23% of mothers and 14% of fathers say that having their child at home during the school break causes stress. Most parents say they keep similar or slightly relaxed rules for their child during the break; other parents waive their usual rules about screen time (20%), bedtime (19%), having friends over (14%), junk food (13%), and sleepovers (13%). More than one-third of parents (37%) feel relieved when their child goes back to school after the holidays.



Report Highlights

1 in 6 parents report high stress levels during the holidays.

Twice as many mothers than fathers report high levels of holiday stress.

1 in 5 parents say their stress level negatively affects their child's enjoyment of the holidays.

1 in 3 parents are relieved when their child goes back to school after the holiday break.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in October 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-18 years living in their household (n=2,020). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 61% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 3 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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Implications

The holiday season is often described as joyful, happy, peaceful, merry...and for many parents, stressful. Stress can emanate from the holiday hustle and bustle, with long to-do lists, seasonal school events, and social gatherings. Stress may be tied to negotiating holiday plans with different family members. The cost of gifts, travel and other holiday activities can create financial pressures for many families. With the resurgence of COVID in some parts of the country, trying to keep all family members healthy can cause additional worry.

This Mott Poll found that 1 in 6 parents acknowledge having a high stress level during the holidays. Mothers in this Mott Poll were twice as likely than fathers to acknowledge having a high stress level during the holidays. In many families, mothers are the ones who take responsibility for planning holiday activities, including cooking, shopping, decorating, and hosting. When mothers don't receive (or won't accept) help from other family members, those responsibilities can start to feel overwhelming.

For one-quarter of parents, stress is tied to placing unrealistic expectations on themselves to create a joyful holiday. These parents may not acknowledge that they don't have enough time, money, or help to provide every element of a traditional holiday celebration. Parents also may believe their child has unrealistic expectations about the gifts they expect to receive or the special holiday events they want to attend. Unrealistic expectations are especially common among parents who describe themselves as having high stress levels around the holidays.

Excessive parental stress can have a negative impact on children's enjoyment of the holidays, but parents can take steps to prevent this from happening. One strategy is to talk as a family about holiday plans and priorities. It may be the case that parents aren't accurate in their perceptions of their child's expectations, favorite holiday memories, or traditions. The discussion can then lead to ways to reduce the amount of effort required for holiday preparations. Families may decide to modify certain holiday traditions or have one less item on the menu for the holiday dinner. Parents can assign each family member a specific holiday task – with the pledge to be satisfied if that task is done differently than in years past.

Parents in this Mott Poll offered a variety of ways to relieve stress, from listening to music to exercising. The holiday season may be a time for parents to model good mental health hygiene, by verbalizing how they recognize and try to relieve stress. For example, parents might say, "I'm really feeling overwhelmed with so many things on our to-do-list for today. Let's take a 5-minute dance break before we get back to checking things off our list." This approach is an invitation for children to share their own feelings of stress and a reminder to take action when their stress is elevated.

An underappreciated source of stress for many parents is having school-age children spending more time at home during the holiday break. In most families, school provides a daily routine, requiring specific times for waking up, getting out the door, bedtime, and meals. Parents often structure household rules to ensure children have adequate nutrition, rest, and time for schoolwork. During the holiday break, children and teens may feel they should not have to follow same rules that apply when school is in session regarding screen time, bedtime, junk food, and having friends over. Although most parents stick fairly close to their usual school-year rules, some parents say that rules go out the window during the holiday break. It's natural to want children to have fun, but parents should strive for happy medium that gives kids a needed break from the structured schedule of the school year, without having them become irritable from lack of sleep or poor diet.