

Holiday mayhem or holiday magic: Getting a positive hockey and holiday experience



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

Shaunna Taylor

The arrival of the holidays might make you flash a smile, while looking forward to seasonal traditions and precious time with family and friends ... or it might make you cringe at the idea of long line-ups, over-packed schedules and stress.

The hockey parent (and parents of children in other sports that practice and compete throughout the winter) has an interesting juggling act to maintain. How to make the holidays actually feel like a holiday – while still maintaining the joys of practices and games within a busy time of year?

No matter what your religious beliefs, all of us will be bombarded through marketing, media, family and peer pressure to do more, buy more, and be more.

Let's take a quick look at what 'holiday' means: Holiday: leisure time away from work; devoted to rest or pleasure. Shuttling our children around like maniacs from one event to the next, eating drive-through foods on the way, and not being truly able to relax while we are there, is taxing on everyone. Sure doesn't feel like a holiday.

Many parents vow to 'take back their holidays' – harking back to days from the past when times were simpler, less scheduled and structured, and families spent quality time talking, playing and learning together. Maybe this year it's time to look at the holiday period as a barometer of what other areas of your family life may need readjusting in order to restore some of that balance of yesteryear.

Hockey is a highly structured sport. It requires commitment on the part of both players and their parents. Equipment and registration fees, transportation, tournament costs, time investment, the list goes on.

As a child progresses up through the years, in either a rec or competitive program, these commitment levels will come into question, and every family will need to take a look at how the investment fits in with their lifestyle. The holidays can bring many of those areas into question.

Many parents have a 'one activity per season' rule, especially in families who have multiple children. Balancing music lessons, art classes, hockey and other activities is probably way too much for one child to handle. Choosing what is most important to your child is an

important life lesson. Sure it's tough to choose, but it will introduce the world of 'priorities,' and how we can better enjoy activities when we aren't feeling pressure to run off and do the next one. The same goes for friend/family events: do you have to say 'yes' to every invitation that comes your way? Probably not. Prioritizing or taking turns is tough, but worth it.

Childhood and teen years are preparation for life, not a performance. The media and sports folklore have given us too many 'how to' stories of child prodigies such as Wayne Gretzky and Tiger Woods. Resist the urge to push your child to the breaking point, or to excel too early. Children need time to grow at their own pace, and to reveal their own gifts. Remember that these gifts may not always be in line with a parent's expectations. Resist the urge to push your child through an NHL training schedule this season.

"Not every second of the day has to have a purpose." "Being 'bored' can be good." "Being 'unstructured' has its place." Nonsense, some may say! These concepts are taboo in today's overscheduled and wacky world of "hyper-parenting" (hyper-parenting is the phrase coined in the USA to describe a child-rearing style that's become very common in North American middle and upper-middle class homes. Parents become over-involved in every detail of their children's academic, athletic and social lives. They over-enrich their children's environment and over-schedule them).

Every child, and at any age, needs to have down time to dream, invent and reflect. This is next to impossible when we shuttle them in a non-stop state of inertia from place to place, activity to activity. No wonder why it's been estimated that more than one-third of Canadian children drop out of sport activities between the ages of 10 and 17.

Burnout used to be a phenomenon experienced primarily by teens and adults, but we are now seeing it in younger children. We need to stop the insanity. Take a pen, look at your calendar, and schedule in some 'nothing.'

One family I know has a special New Year's ritual. No matter where they are, or whom they're with, they share and write down what they are grateful for from the year before, and some of their dreams and goals in the year to come. They put them in a sealed envelope. The next year they open, read and repeat the process. It's a ritual that's easy to take anywhere (whether they're in a hockey tournament, relaxing at home, or at a skating meet).

What are your family rituals? Make this and future holidays memorable, by soaking in the rituals that make your family unique.

Shaunna Taylor is the Sport Psychology Consultant at the Ottawa High Performance Centre.

Reprinted with permission from the January, 2006 issue of *Centre Ice*.