

Helping Kids from Low-Income and/or Dysfunctional Homes Handle The Holidays

The ideas found below emanate from two sources:

1. Notes taken by Dr. Mac while attending a staff meeting on the topic at the Lorge School for students with emotional and behavioral disorders in New York City.
 2. Thoughts that came to mind while attending the meeting.
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The holidays can bring on emotional fragility in many of us. Even among members of tightly knit, well-functioning families, holiday times can bring anxiety and stress. For kids from certain homes, the stress can be overwhelming. This debilitating situation can arise for a number of reasons:

1. Home life and events do not match the happy ones portrayed in media, storybooks, artwork, etc.
2. Realization that one's home is not as happy and/or functional as that of others.
3. Lack of financial resources to celebrate the holidays as others do
 - Inability to give gifts
 - No receipt of gifts
 - Inadequate food supply/quality
4. Family does not celebrate the holidays of the mainstream culture at the school.
5. Lack of structure in the youngster's daily routine (school not in session)
6. Loss of personal support (supportive staff and faculty of school not available)

Staff working with these youngsters in heightened need, must find ways to provide supports in addition to, or in place of the usual ones. Our difficult jobs take on increased load and importance as holidays approach.

Below are some recommendations developed by the Lorge School staff with a few of my own thoughts placed in the pot.

1. Be a good active listener. Provide the emotional support needed by students who are anticipating a less-than-joyous holiday break.
2. Share your own experiences, especially if they were less-than-positive and/or run counter to the idealistic images in the media.
3. Stock the school store with items that can contribute to the family. Students can purchase these items with their earned points AND a gift worth \$10 from the school. This gift cannot be withdrawn due to misbehavior. It is our holiday gift to them.

4. Help the students to create gifts and contributions for the upcoming holidays:
 - Holiday cards
 - Gift certificates to family members that can be "traded in" for "services"
(Good for car washes, foot massages, making breakfast, cleaning the bathroom, etc.)
 - Holiday theme placemats or centerpieces for the dinner table
5. Hold a pre-holiday staff-serves-the-students brunch during school hours to say goodbye in an informal and festive manner. Staff makes a point of socializing with the students. Staff socialize alone at another time. Assure that decorations either reflect the lives of all or are generic (streamers, party hats).
6. Decorate the school entrance to welcome students back to school after the holidays.
7. Hold a small, short party to welcome students back. Consider letting the students know of this party before the holiday break.
8. Send holiday cards to the students' homes.
9. Keep in touch over the holidays via phone, videoconferencing, or e-mail. If you are concerned about the students having your main e-mail address, set up another, "one time", e-mail address on Yahoo or Google. When the holidays are over, let the students know that the e-mail address is no longer active. You can monitor the box for messages, but do not respond.
10. Tell the students that you do not wish to receive any purchased gifts from them. Tell them to spend the money on their family's gift. Gifts to you should be made by them or be acts of kindness
11. Arrange for students to help in a soup kitchen, homeless shelter, toy drive or otherwise give to others previous to the start of the holiday break.
12. Have students reflect on things about which they are thankful (e.g., "friends", "caring teachers at the school", "the park near my house", etc.)
13. Help kids practice customs that will be part of the home's celebration (e.g., chants, songs).
14. Show appropriate, non-hurtful humorous media (books, articles, comedy sketch) that make fun of the holidays, stress, etc. Use as discussion starters.

15. Provide practice in holiday social skills (Asking others to pass the plate, welcoming guests, talking with adult relatives)
16. Provide practice in stress relief (deep breath, count to 10, excuse oneself from the room for 5 minutes) and/or anger management strategies.
17. Discuss ways to avoid temptations during non-structured days (Getting in trouble outside of home, overeating), the location of positive places (town recreation center, public library), and ways to entertain oneself (board games, card games, library book, computer sites that teach things).

OTHERS?? Talk it over with others in your program. What can be done to help our kids have a better holiday?