

It Doesn't Have to Be Perfect to Be Wonderful: Strategies for a Low-Stress Holiday Season Your Kids will Remember

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast, the podcast of Boston Children's Museum.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): My name is Olivia Richter, Digital Content Manager and your host for today's show. We're excited to bring you a special holiday edition of Big and Little today. No matter what holiday, special occasion or tradition you celebrate around this time of year, along with the cheer can come large amounts of stress for parents and caregivers.

Parents want to give kids a magical holiday season that they'll remember forever. But with a million things already on their plates, a time of year intended to be joyful can quickly feel full of pressure, expectations and costs. We wanted to help identify ways to take the stress out of the season and bring back the meaning and magic with simple, low to no cost ideas for families.

Here to help us is Meghan Block, the owner of Boston Moms and a mother of 3 young kids. Meghan works with many mothers in and around Boston and has an excellent perspective on the challenges that moms and caregivers face in today's world. Through her work at Boston Moms and as a mom herself, she brings us some great ideas and advice for creating a joyful, memorable and low stress holiday season that kids will remember through the years.

Let's dive in.

Stay tuned after our conversation with Meghan for a special holiday segment not to be missed.

Thank you to PNC Bank for sponsoring the Big and Little Podcast.

Hello, and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast, Meghan.

MEGHAN BLOCK: Hi. Thanks so much for having me. I'm so happy to be here today.

OLIVIA: Thanks so much for coming on. We're so excited to have you, especially as someone who's so keyed in to the community of moms in and around the Boston area. Before we get started, I'm hoping maybe, you can tell us a little about yourself, as well as Boston Moms and what Boston Moms offers.

MEGHAN: Yeah, absolutely. My name is Meghan Block, and I'm a South Shore mom of 3, and the owner of Boston Moms and Bostonmoms.com.

Boston Moms is a collaborative, parenting resource written by local moms for local moms. So we offer parenting perspectives, unique to being a parent in Greater Boston. Spotlights on local events, and things to do our favorite local businesses, and then also, just some musings about what it's like to be a mom at our stage in motherhood. We have 25 real local moms, who write for Boston Moms. And I always say that I drive the ship, but they keep it afloat.

OLIVIA: That's fantastic. I think it's so great that you're working to create this community of moms because I know it can get kind of lonely, especially these last couple of years. And it can feel like you're kind of going through the challenges of parenting alone. So, a resource like this that brings moms together into a community is such a beneficial tool.

So before we kind of jump into our chat about the holiday season, I wanted to ask you about the challenges that moms and caregivers have been facing these last 18 months. And some people might be kind of sick of talking about it, but we want to look to the future.

So you work with so many moms, and I'm curious about your take on what's on their minds right now. Like what are they concerned about now after 18 months of disruptions? How would you say they're doing?

MEGHAN: I think, in general, moms are hopeful. I think there's a fair-- we definitely have had our-- the weight has been on us more than anybody else, probably for the last two years. And as things are starting to open up and vaccinations are available and things are getting back to somewhat normal, I think people are hopeful.

Hopeful that life will return to normal, but hopeful also that the lessons that we learned in the last two years about what's important, and slowing down, and asking for help, and requiring help as moms, will sort of stick with us. So I would say the message and the feeling is hope.

OLIVIA: That's awesome it's great to hear that the message is hope after all of the challenges and hardship. It's obviously, we know how difficult it's been. So a message of hope is really, really great to hear. And especially, as we're in the holiday season, a feeling of hope is a wonderful thing to have. But we know how stressful it can be for parents, especially working parents with a million things on their plates. I'm curious if you have advice that you could offer to parents and to caregivers, who are kind of struggling to make the holiday season as special and memorable for their kids as they can, with everything else that they have going on.

MEGHAN: Yeah, absolutely. So I think I probably have, not a unique perspective, but a new perspective on this. So at this time last year, I actually lost my mom after a long illness. And so I'm young to lose my mother, and my kids are young to lose their grandmother. And it really, really put a damper on our holiday season, and rightfully so.

I was very deep in grief. And I had to give myself a lot of grace as to what I-- I'm a typically a high achiever. I love the holidays. I like to go all out. And it forced me-- we're going through COVID and then losing my mother. I had to go all the way back to basics. And I had a friend actually tell me that kids-- my grief was warranted but kids feel your stress.

And so if you want to give them a holiday season that they're going to remember, you need to focus on the stuff that doesn't make you stressed out. They're going to feel that. So take the pressure off.

Remember what it was like when you were a kid and the things that you remember about your holiday season as a child. It's probably not the fancy table linens. It's probably not the, like an immaculate Christmas tree or really awesome, whatever, goodie bags for your classroom.

It's the togetherness. It's the working in the kitchen with your parents or seeing your family. And I think one thing to note with this too is like this is an opportunity for us to remove some stress and instead, of focus on what our families consider is the meaning of the season. And that doesn't have to have a religious connotation. It can be whatever holiday you celebrate.

Maybe, it does lean into religion for you and your family. But even if it doesn't, maybe the meaning of this season for you is to slow down. It's to see family you don't typically get to see. It's to gather in your community in a way that you don't do on a typical day. So focus on those things what the season means to you and your family. And it's likely not extravagance, and it's likely not gifts.

OLIVIA: Absolutely. I feel like the pandemic gave us this new perspective on the importance of self-care. Similar to how you said that kids will pick up on your stress, it reminds me a lot of that saying, "Put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others." No mask pun intended there.

And you do offer a really great perspective having gone through that grief during the holiday season last year, which I'm so sorry to hear about. I mean, that is a huge amount of stress and pain. And I love how you noted that slowing down and going back to basics, taking the pressure off yourself was kind of the most effective thing that you could do to give your family a really meaningful holiday season because if you're continuing to put that pressure on yourself while you're still dealing with all of that pain, they're going to feel that too.

So, toys what about parents who-- toys, toys, toys. What about parents who kind of want to limit the number of toys, or maybe, they, just don't have really, the means right now to provide a pile of presents this holiday season? Do you have any advice based on what you've observed from the families you work with on how to keep the holiday season magical and memorable for kids without all the presents?

MEGHAN: Yeah, so I think this is kind of a hot button topic. We all get sucked into the commercialism of the holidays, and the hot toys that every kid wants to have, and wanting to give your child the world, whether you have the means or not or whether you just don't want a bunch of stuff.

We have some families on our team that are large families. They have 5 children. And if you have 5 kids and a regular sized house, where are you going to put all that stuff? I think it's another place to kind of take the pressure off.

I and my team-- we've talked a little bit about experience gifts. So things like gifting, and you can create something. You can make like a gift certificate or something to present to the kids. Maybe, they're going to go to the Children's Museum. Maybe, you're going to take us a small family trip.

Maybe, it's something even more simple of an experience gift that you're gifting, like a basket of ingredients and a recipe. And you're carving out a specific day, where you and your child or your niece or your nephew or whoever you're gifting to, are going to actually experience baking together. And it's the time together.

I can say with 1,000% certainty that those are the presents that the kids will remember. They're not going to remember the hot toy of the moment that you searched for a hundred hours for and paid double the price. They're going to remember the thought that went into things even if it feels like they won't. They really will.

OLIVIA: Absolutely. It goes hand in hand with what we were just talking about. That quality time is really what they're going to remember and what you're going to remember together as a family.

So I know that because of the pandemic, many families are still pretty concerned about visiting crowded public spaces, which in years prior, was probably one of a favorite thing to do for many families. So, do you have any kind of fun ideas for no cost or low cost activities that can be done right at home, or maybe you're out in the community, but you're not in a super, public crowded space to celebrate the holidays?

MEGHAN: Yeah, absolutely. Well, for me, I think our team-- were pretty excited to see community events coming back. So outdoor tree lightings and other kinds of community events that are outside that are generally lower risk. So if you're somebody who that feels like it would be a good fit for you and your family, those are available now, which is exciting.

Other things, if you're wanting to stay even more distant-- each year, my family actually one of our traditions is to go and drive around and look at holiday light displays. And so our kids know that, usually

after school ends for school break, usually that night, we get in our pajamas, and we drive around, and we look at holiday lights. And that's just something you can build in that tradition.

There's other things like crafting and gingerbread houses and stuff. It doesn't have to be fancy to still have ways to celebrate the season, and it's low cost.

OLIVIA: Yeah, I love that. I always remember being a kid and kind of going off on that adventure to find the holiday lights wherever you can in the neighborhood. It's the process of heading off on that adventure that's so fun. And when you finally get to see it, it's so magical. So I definitely love that idea.

So, the holiday season it's going to come and go, but there's always a desire for resources for parents on these same kind of ideas for low cost, low fuss family fun activities and experiences, as well as sort of tips on managing stress and helping to encourage your kids happy and healthy development.

So I know Boston Moms is a wonderful resource for all of the above, but I'm wondering if you have any other favorite resources offering this kind of information and advice.

MEGHAN: Yeah, absolutely.

So, I try to limit my social media exposure, which might sound a little strange because that's where my job is. But when I am on social media, I'm really careful at what I consume. So I kind of want to leave this as, I guess, a bit of advice for anybody listening. So be careful with what you consume. And even with these resources that I want to mention, only look at them and use them if it's going to personally serve you.

One of the things that I like most actually, I follow a lot of Montessori influencers on Instagram. They offer a ton of really easy activities to do at home with your kids that most often, you have the supplies already at home. And then my favorite parenting influencer actually is Busy Toddler. And toddler is in the name, but she has stuff for older kids as well.

And it's just a lot of hands on activities, lots of busy boxes, and sensory activities that are good for all kids and fun for parents too. And if you're not sitting there and personally engaging, you can also sort of set your kids up with some of her activities and maybe, get a few moments of quiet to enjoy your cup of coffee or something. So those are a couple of my favorites.

OLIVIA: Awesome. Yeah, we definitely love the tactile hands-on activities but as well as kind of giving parents a breather. So yes, activities that kids can just kind of do on their own. We love those.

So, those are all such good ideas and great advice for parents. I'm curious, is there anything that I haven't touched on or asked you that you feel you'd like to add to our listeners today?

MEGHAN: It's just really important for this season and for always. I heard this quote a million years ago, and it really sticks with me that it doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful.

And whatever the holiday season looks like for you and your family, try to find those little glimmers of the good in it even if you're having a really tough year or if it's not exactly how you imagined. It doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful.

OLIVIA: Oh, I love that saying. It's such a wonderful message that you could really apply to any time or event, not just the holiday season. Like we keep saying, it's really is just about that quality time spent together more than anything else, more than the presents, more than the fancy table linens as you said. So, let's wrap things up on a light, fun note. So I'm curious, do you have any favorite traditions that you really love to do with your family during the holiday season?

MEGHAN: I already spoke about our Christmas lights drive. I have two others. One, we always put out a basket in our living room of holiday books, and we do it right after Thanksgiving. We put out this basket.

And every year, I add a book or two to the basket. And that's what we read as a family for the whole month. And it's really fun.

So some of the stories are nostalgic from my childhood or my husband's childhood. Some are more new, and the kids love doing it. My 2-year-old actually walks around most of the time right now with a Daniel Tiger holiday book that she pulls out of the basket every morning. So that's a fun tradition.

The other thing that I do that I don't know if any of our listeners have ever heard of or have done-- so I encourage you to do this. If you are a family who has a Christmas tree and a real Christmas tree every year, my family-- we do an after Christmas tree, which is based on the book, *The After Christmas Tree* by a woman named Linda Wagner Tyler. And this is a tradition that my parents started with me.

So every year on New Year's day, we take our tree out of the house, and we take all the ornaments and everything off of it. And we put it in our yard, and we decorate it with-- we roll cones and peanut butter and birdseed. And we string berries, and we decorate our after-Christmas tree, and leave it in the backyard for a few days for the animals to come.

And it kind of gives the tree a second life before we then recycle the Christmas tree. And it's just so special to me. I did it. I have the most fond memories. This is what I'm talking about with very simple stuff and meaning a lot. I can literally remember our fingers freezing, and my dad and I stringing popcorn, and my mom stringing cranberries, my sister, and decorating the tree. We used to keep it in the front of our house as we lived in the woods.

And now, I have a city family, so we have a very small backyard. But we still put our after-Christmas tree out, and my kids love it. And it's something that just brings me so much joy to be able to pass that tradition down.

I'll be writing about that this year on Boston Moms. So more on that soon, and I'll try to find a book link too. But it's really special, and I encourage you, if you're a family who has a Christmas tree, to repurpose it because it's so, so fun.

OLIVIA: Oh that's amazing I've never heard of that tradition before, but I absolutely love it. It's another one of those low cost, low fuss-- I mean, really no cost because you can just use the natural materials outside, kind of activities that you can do together.

And I also like how it's a way to keep the joy going into the new year because I know that for me, at least, and I think for others, as the holidays wrap up, can kind of start feeling a bit low because we're trudging into the rest of the winter. And there's not much to look forward to for a while, but something like that I feel is a great way to keep that spirit going into the new year, which we definitely need going into 2022.

MEGHAN: Yeah, it's so fun. And even last year when we did it-- so I mentioned I lost my mom at the beginning of the holiday season last year. My dad came and did the after Christmas tree with us. And it was just so joyous because it really feels like this tradition that's gone from my childhood-- now to my kids. And I just hope that at least, one of my kids takes it on to their families.

OLIVIA: I'm sure they will. I feel like that's just one of those things that you kind of remember forever. So I can imagine they would want to pass that down.

Thank you for sharing that with us, and thank you for coming on. This has been so great. I feel like you've really provided us with some really wonderful ideas to make the holiday season special. So thank you so much.

MEGHAN: Thank you so much for having me. Happy holidays.

OLIVIA: You as well. Goodbye, Meghan. Thank you.

MEGHAN: Bye. Thank you.

OLIVIA: To all our listeners out there, what is your favorite holiday tradition? We ask this question to a few kids in our community. Here's what they had to say.

CHILD 1: My favorite holiday tradition is to go over to my nana's house and celebrate with my cousins and open gifts.

CHILD 2: And playing in the snow.

ADULT: You love playing in the snow?

CHILD 2: Yes.

CHILD 3: My favorite time of the holiday season is decorating the tree with my family.

CHILD 4: I love making Christmas cookies with my family.

OLIVIA: Thanks for listening. That's it for the Big and Little Podcast. If you enjoyed the show, please make sure to subscribe, and stay tuned for much more coming up in 2022.

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