



Taking in the Holidays...Happily!
A Survival-and-Joy Guide for Parents and Kids
With Differing Learning Styles

Deb Singleton, Whole Learning Coach™

Welcome!

I am so delighted that you have chosen to gift yourself with this guide that will help you and your family to understand each other better, reduce stress, foster harmony, and experience more joyful family time during this holiday season and beyond. ***This guide is for you if:***

- your family's holidays are more stressful, full of conflict, and overwhelming than you like.
- your kids are very different from you, have different energy levels or approaches to life than you, and maybe even defy understanding at times.
- you want to make sure the needs of each person in your family are respected, honored, and met.

If so, then I encourage you to grab your favorite beverage or snack, relax and get comfy, breathe deeply, look forward to learning exciting new ideas and strategies, and read on!



In a very real way, parenting is sacred and tender work, quite possibly the most important work on the planet. But it is also some of the most challenging

work we may ever be called to do. If you are reading this guide, there is a very good chance that you have dedicated yourself to doing the best job you can do of parenting your children. I truly honor you for that because I have been there too – working hard, often succeeding, but frequently being baffled, frustrated or even despairing instead.

My kids are grown and living their own lives now, but I have not forgotten the extensive time, commitment, love, and energy that was involved in raising them to be happy, healthy, kind and responsible adults. So I know that there is also a very good chance you are often exhausted and overwhelmed by your



responsibilities, especially during the busy holiday season. Too often, we forget that “we cannot pour out of an empty cup”. We forget to get the support we need and the information that will help make the job easier.

My intention with this guide is to provide **compassionate support** for you, essential **information, solutions** that work, and... **a blueprint that will help you not just survive your holiday season, but truly *enjoy* it with your family - more than you ever have before.**



It’s not easy parenting kids that are very different from you or from each other. I know. My kids are almost total opposites, and they are also different from my husband and me. There have been numerous times over the years that I was baffled by my kids’ behavior or how best to respond to it. During the holidays, the flurry of intense activity ramped up everyone’s sensitivities, tension, and conflicts, making for some not-so-pleasant days during a season that I dearly wanted to be joyful, sweet and special.

For over 30 years my own kids, my students, and my clients have taught me a LOT about what life is like when you learn differently than the way society says you “should” learn. Ironically, only a minority of students now learn in the “sit-down-hold-still-and-be-quiet” style that is common in our children’s schools, which means there is a big mismatch between the schools’ teaching style and our children’s learning styles. Learning differences affect school, social relationships, health, family dynamics... just about everything. Unfortunately, society focuses almost entirely on the challenges these young people experience, i.e., what is “wrong” with them or how they are “disabled”.



Fortunately, there is a growing trend toward honoring “neurodiversity”, recognizing that different does not necessarily mean disabled. In fact, the good news is that non-traditional learning styles are usually accompanied by huge talents, so these kids are true blessings

in this world. They fill me with awe and wonder on a regular basis!

Yet parenting them can be tough because they **are** different, often very different from their parents. There were a few days when I *wanted* to throttle my kids, but I did not (of course) and I never would. What saved my parenting, and what I want to share with you, was discovering how my kids’ brains work, how they learn and function best. It helped me see the world from my kids’ perspective, so I could develop strategies that helped them to integrate the overabundance of sensations and information that bombard all of us each day, process those sensations, get their needs met, find calmness, cope, learn joyfully, and thrive.



Here's a fundamental truth: Stress and conflict occur when someone's needs are not being met.

When I understood my kids' needs, I could help them get those needs met and life was more enjoyable.

Throughout my career as an educator, mentor, and now Whole Learning Coach, I have had the privilege of working with many young people whose learning styles are different than the traditional teaching style in our schools. It has become my passion to help these exceptional young people tap into their natural learning strengths to address their challenges and get their needs met. When they are feeling safe, heard, believed, and acknowledged – and they learn successful strategies based in their strengths - they thrive in both their learning and their lives. In this guide, I will share some of my best strategies with you, so you and your kids can get your needs met and joyfully thrive - during the holidays and every day of the year!

In this Guide you will discover:

- How our brains work, what actually happens in them when we process experience, and how you can help them learn better and more easily.
- What ways we can take in experience, be limited by our bodies, connect and interact with the world, and have personality affect our learning.
- Hot tips for how to understand, work with, play with, manage and enjoy each type of learner during the holiday season and beyond.
- Strategies for each family member will that reduce stress, overwhelm and overload.
- Joy strategies for people with different learning styles.
- Successful techniques to use to promote peace at the holiday dinner table
- My Top 9 Holiday Survival-And-Joy Strategies that work for everyone!

This guide offers many ideas and strategies that may be useful in your family situation and others that may not. As you read, notice where you feel hopeful and inspired, and where you might feel skeptical or resistant. Breathe into each feeling/thought and ask yourself these questions:

- ❖ What is the source of this feeling I am having?
- ❖ What reasons might I have for resisting change?
- ❖ In what ways could change be exciting and liberating?
- ❖ What would need to happen for me to be ready to try new ways of experiencing and relating to my family?
- ❖ What would it look and feel like to have peaceful collaboration and a team spirit in my family during the holidays?

I encourage you to share the ideas in this guide with the other members of your family, talk about them, and use them as springboards for discussions that help you to understand each other better. Together consider which strategies, if any, could be easily implemented within your family. I caution you, however, to try just one strategy at a time. This guide is not a “you should do all this” guide - the goal here is to *reduce* your stress, after all, not *increase* it by requiring you to complete another checklist of tasks! Be gentle with yourselves, choose one strategy and practice it for a week or two, and see if it makes your lives easier. Only implement a new strategy when you are quite ready to do so.

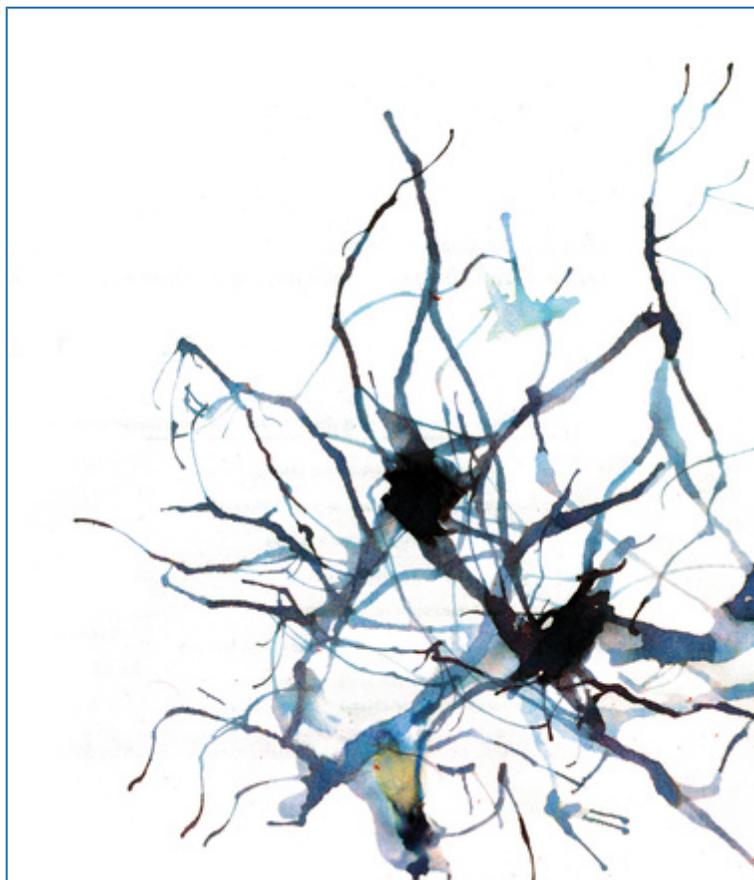
Let's get started!



The Holiday Season and Our Brains

Why talk about our brains and learning styles when I am writing a holiday guide? Well, holidays are high stimulation events - there's so much to take in! Helping the brain to take in and process the myriad holiday experiences will help your family to have a much happier and healthier holiday season.

To understand how you and your child take in and process information, it helps to understand a little bit about how our brains work. So bear with me as I take you on a brief journey with me into our brains.



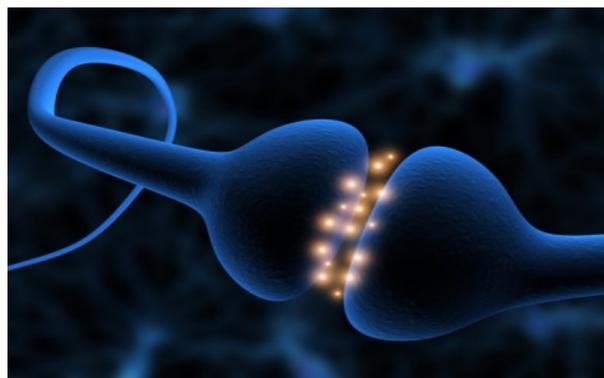
This blown-ink art above gives a pretty good idea of what the network of cells in our brains looks like, except that the networks in our brains are much more complex and denser than what is depicted here.

We call one cell in the brain or nervous system a **neuron**. In this image, each dark blob represents the main body of one neuron and the lines stretching out between the blobs are the neurons' living tendrils (called axons and dendrites) that connect the different neurons to each other. Typically, each neuron is connected to multiple other neurons, which is why the brain's neural network looks a lot like a complex 3D spider web.

Learning is the process of taking in and processing information.

Scientists have discovered is that when we learn, what is actually happening in our brains is that neurons in the brain are creating new tendrils to connect to other neurons in new and different ways. There is a saying that “magic happens when connections are made” and that is certainly true in the human brain.

With all the activity of the holidays, a lot of new connections need to be made between the neurons in our brains. Sometimes the neurons just make more connections between the same neurons. This is what happens when we review or experience again what we learned/experienced earlier. But if we are experiencing and learning something new, then neurons that were never connected before are now connecting to each other.



Here are some of the things that we now know affect this process of making neural connections.

1. **Good health and nutrition are vital to learning.**

Chemical reactions in the brain require plenty of water, energy, nutrients, and oxygen. Without these, we just cannot cope with, process or learn from experience. Drinking plenty of water, eating well, and exercising are fantastic for improving our holidays!



2. **We learn best when we are happy and feel safe.** When we are happy, chemicals are released into the brain that greatly increase our ability to take in



and process experience, make new neural connections, and learn. We become much better at coping and learning when we feel happy and safe.

3. On the other hand, **stress and anxiety are huge hindrances to processing information and learning.**

Stress and anxiety cause the brain and body to shift priorities **away** from thinking – and **toward** protecting us from perceived danger. The emphasis becomes sensing danger, priming our muscles to respond quickly to hazards, and responding reflexively. Many of the nerve impulses never even make it to the brain, the most primitive part of the brain takes control, and chemicals are released into the brain that actually stop the flow of signals in the thinking regions of the brain. Because of the biology of our bodies, we literally cannot process experience well when we are under stress.



4. **Stress also causes a visual reflex that makes it hard for us to focus our eyes.** Vision experts tell us that, under stress, the outer muscles of our eyes



automatically tighten so we are more able to pick up movement at the outer edges of our vision and see danger as early as possible. We have no control over this reflex. For hours after “danger” has passed, our eyes **cannot focus** and therefore, we struggle to read or write. Try reading after you have watched a tension-filled, action-packed movie and you will see what I mean. And if we cannot focus our eyes, it makes it a LOT harder to take in and process experience, especially if it involves reading or numbers.

5. **Learning styles have a dramatic impact on how we take in experience.** Depending on the person, key sensations

can speed up the rate at which neural connections are made. For many people, if key sensations do not occur, the individual almost *cannot* make connections. Kinesthetic (body) learners, for example, have a biological need for movement in order for neural connections to be triggered. Without movement, learning is much more of a struggle and takes much longer.



So, to get the most enjoyment from the holidays, your family will want to:

- Take good care of your bodies - getting plenty of water, healthy food, and exercise.
- Focus on fostering positive thinking and positive experiences.
- Understand and reduce the stress and anxiety in your lives.
- To increase the happiness and decrease stress, know and respect your family members' learning styles. So...Read on!



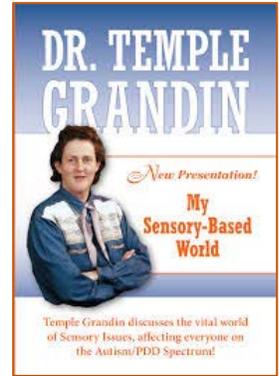
The Needs of Different Learners

We tend to believe that every other person experiences the world the same way we do, has the same sensations that we do, and thinks the way we do. That's because the way we do it is "normal" to us. Children who taste sounds or feel colors (two examples of synesthesia) believe everyone does, until someone calls them crazy! For one of my clients, each number had its own unique color. But other people rarely experience the world just the way we do. We all have unique perceptions, gifts, and talents we offer the world. Howard Gardner was the person who first dubbed the term "multiple intelligences" to describe the different ways that people can be smart or even gifted.

When my kids were young, I could see that each person in the family interacted with the world and took in information in very different ways. These were especially obvious during the holidays. We still tend to have those differences to some extent today, but they are less pronounced because my husband and I helped our kids use their learning strengths to exercise other learning skills in multiple learning styles. We were able to do that because the human brain is "plastic", meaning it is able to change the physical structure of its neural networks in response to experience. I count on this in my work with my clients.

Neuroscientist Michael Merzenich was the first one to discover what he termed "brain plasticity". Through him we learned that our brains change structure over time - in fact, they change every day! So scientists no longer say that we are stuck with the same neurons and neural networks that we had at birth. Instead, our brains are constantly reconstructing themselves. When we focus our intention and actions, we can direct the course of that reconstruction by choosing certain life activities.

Temple Grandin is a classic example. Born profoundly autistic, she was consistently encouraged by her mother to try new experiences, to stretch beyond her comfort zone, and to believe in herself. Because of that, she is now a professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, an internationally known public speaker, and an effective advocate for those on the autism spectrum and for the humane treatment of domestic livestock.



Exercising the brain to create new and denser networks is a specific kind of learning called “brain training”. However, brain training takes time. In the meantime, you are managing a family of people with differing learning styles. Your first step is to understand what factors go into a person’s learning style.

Different experts and researchers have different systems of grouping the components of learning styles. For the purposes of my coaching process, I have found it useful to look at **five different aspects of learning style**:

- 1) Experiential – **what senses** we use to **take in** experience,
- 2) Biological – our **bodies’ limits** to what experience we can take in,
- 3) Relational - **what aspect of the world** we connect with the most,
- 4) Orientation – **how we interact** with the world most, and
- 5) Personality – the **qualities of self** we bring to our learning process.

Experiential: How We Take In Experience

We take in experience through our senses, using what Howard Gardner called “multiple intelligences” and others call “smarts”. (Interestingly, taste and smell are not usually included as one of the ways in which we are “sense smart”.) When we use these smarts, we take in sensations, ideas, and experiences most efficiently and speed up the making of new neural connections. Keep in mind that we usually do have multiple intelligences, but often, one tends to dominate.

Experiential smarts include:

1. Kinesthetic [body smarts]

- a. Learning activated by whole body moving.
- b. Good at: acting out scenes, going on field trips, jumping on a trampoline while memorizing, playing sports.
- c. During holidays, my son enjoyed sleigh rides, active games, snowball fights, putting lights on the Christmas tree, building things for presents, etc. Challenge = sitting still for dinner.
- d. Holiday Tip: For dining chairs, use chairs that swivel or tip back; under the table, put foam “rollers” kids can roll quietly with their feet.



2. Tactile [touch smarts]

- a. Sensation of touch activates processing circuits.
- b. When they touch or create, they remember.
- c. My daughter enjoys unpacking the holiday decorations (each is an old friend she can touch), making presents, petting a dog while listening to party conversations.
- d. Holiday Tip: “Fidgets” (something in hands) **help** them pay attention!



3. Visual-spatial [picture smarts]

- a. Learn by seeing; think & remember in images.
- b. Good at: art, seeing 3D, visualizing, visual memory, maps.
- c. No one in our family can get into the spirit of a holiday until all decorations are unpacked and set out to see!
- d. Holiday Tip: Have your children visualize themselves doing tasks that you want them to do, especially if there are several tasks involved.
- e. Dyslexics: gifted 3D perception because “mind’s eye” moves, but it can make letters seem to move on the page.



4. Linguistic [word smarts]

- a. "Have words, will learn!" Some need to SEE the words; some prefer hearing them.
- b. Good at: listening, reading, writing, speaking.
- c. As the writer in our family, I journal to keep me sane, create holiday scavenger hunt clues, and write lovely visualizations, poetry, and songs when I can. Happily, all of us love to read!
- d. Holiday Tip: Have kids write down instructions, so they understand.



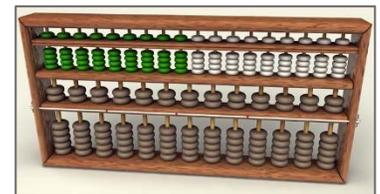
5. Musical-rhythmic [music smarts]

- a. Music soothes and makes it easier to learn
- b. Good at: creating, playing and listening to music
- c. My husband built a sophisticated speaker system, nearly always has music on when he is working/thinking hard, and has an extensive music collection. By popular agreement, he is always in charge of our holiday music selection. But I am most likely to lead us in singing, chanting, or drumming.
- d. Holiday Tip: Try doing simple chants or body percussion together.



6. Logical-mathematical [number or logic smarts]

- a. Brain activated by measurements, patterns, and logic.
- b. Good at: numbers, math, chess, computers, puzzles, patterns.
- c. My husband plans and cooks our extensive holiday brunches using lists, charts, schedules. Having all the food ready at once is a puzzle!
- d. Holiday Tips: Measure wrapping paper, double a recipe, break a complex process down into a step-by-step procedure.



7. Intuitive-empathic [gut-feeling and emotion smarts]

- a. Emotion or story gives meaning to ideas.
- b. Good at: sensing what others are feeling, comforting others, gut feeling, compassion, “just knowing”.
- c. Our daughter is strongly empathic, so her favorite holiday activity is *giving* presents - because she gets to feel the joy of people who received her thoughtful gifts! But she needs breaks away from people when she gets empathic overload during holiday gatherings.
- d. Holiday Tip: In crowds, help your child take deep, easy breaths and visualize being refreshed by a gentle breeze blowing through the heart.



Biological: The Body's Limits

We may have learning strengths, but our biology can put limits on them. A child may be limited by whether she has too much or too little energy, biorhythms that are out of synchrony with school schedules, hypersensitivity (highly sensitive to sensation), or hyposensitivity (poor sensitivity, causing sensation seeking). One of my former clients is strongly visual, but cannot watch long movies because the movement in them creates visual overload. So instead, he uses static photos, diagrams, short YouTube videos, etc.

We won't cover all these biological factors now, but hypersensitive children in particular can suffer from all the stimulation of holiday time. Their brains have not yet developed the ability to screen out (i.e., not pay attention to) unwanted sensory input – the biology is just not there yet. My social son very much wanted to go to pre-school, but even the most peaceful preschool in the area was too much stimulation for him. Too many kids were in too small a space, being too

noisy and too active for too long - even if for just a few hours of preschool. (He also was the kid who always needed soft clothing with the tags cut out.) Telling him to “get over it”, “deal with it” or “just ignore it” would have been worse than useless; he really was *trying* to deal with it but couldn’t, so saying these things would only have convinced him that he was powerless in the face of sensory overload. Our solution was to enroll him in selected park district classes, which had fewer kids in a much larger space for only 1 or 2 hours at a time. He loved it! He got his social time, activities he liked, and only as much stimulation as he could handle. As he grew, his nervous system matured so that now he makes a living doing specialty car fabrication – a high sensory stimulation job indeed!



A few specific symptoms of overload include: avoiding hugs and kisses (tactile overload); needing to leave a party or movie theater (sound & visual overload); putting hands on ears (sound overload); temper tantrums, curling into a ball, repetitive movements or hyperactivity (for any kind of overload).

Avoiding eye contact can be due to visual overload. But for visual learners, instead, it may be because they think in pictures. Translating their picture thoughts into words (or others’ words into picture thoughts) often requires them to “look on their inner mind screen” to focus on their picture thoughts. Eye contact is just too distracting for their thinking – they end up thinking about how your face looks instead of what you are trying to tell them or what they are trying to say. So looking away from you may be exactly what they need to pay attention to a conversation! You need to ask your child what they are seeing on their mind screen to know why they are looking away.

The best solution to overload is preventing it – only have one major activity on the schedule each day, allow kids to step out for a walk or sensory break when they feel overload coming on, lots of time in nature, ear plugs (if they can

tolerate the feel of them), and regular meditation and mindfulness practices. When overload hits, each of these is also a successful treatment, as are deep pressure, deep breathing, reading a book (maybe with you), and centering techniques.

Relational: What We Relate to in the World

These learning styles involve **what** we connect and relate to most in the world.

1. Intrapersonal [self smarts]

- a. Need alone time to process information first.
- b. Good at: understanding own thoughts/ feelings; self-motivation.
- c. My daughter is the most self-aware person I know – in a healthy way. Prior to any holiday gathering, my daughter needs to have plenty of alone time to prepare herself for the gathering.
- d. Holiday Tip: With your child, schedule “alone time” around holiday events.

2. Interpersonal [social smarts]

- a. Need human contact and/or conversation to take in information.
- b. Good at: working in groups, discussions, telling stories, caring, listening deeply, helping people.
- c. The best way to get my son to make presents, clean his room, do his homework, and enjoy the holidays was to be with him. Doing these things on his own when he was younger was very challenging. But if he had our company or could bounce ideas off us, he was fine.
- d. Holiday Tip: Offer to work with your child on overwhelming tasks.



3. Naturalistic [nature smarts]

- a. Connects deeply with nature.
- b. Good with: plants/animals/nature, being outdoors, nature's processes.
- c. Our kids loved crafting a "seasons table" to represent nature's changes in each season.
- d. Holiday Tip: Create a "nature/seasons table" in your home.



4. Existential [universal/big-picture smarts]

- a. Connects deeply with the world, universe, humanitarian causes.
- b. Good at: seeing "big picture", connections between ideas/things, cause and effect; needs to know "why" and "how we know that".
- c. We have a magnetic weekly calendar on the refrigerator, so everyone can see "the big picture" of what is planned for the holiday week and not be stressed about schedules. Some families use white boards.
- d. Holiday Tip: As a family, choose a social action project to do together.



5. Imaginal [imagination smarts]

- a. Connects with "inner reality" of imagination.
- b. Good at: visualizing, inventing.
- c. One of my former clients uses his powerful imagination and 3D visual strength to see new possibilities and invent new technologies. My daughter once gave geodes as holiday presents for 20 people, each with a unique short story she wrote inspired by that person's geode.
- d. Holiday Tip: To teach conflict resolution, help your child brainstorm several actions to take and imagine the results of each.



Orientation: How We Interact With the World

We each tend to interact with the world in one of five ways.

- Intellectual/analytical people **think** about things, experiences, people – but not much about feelings or actions. For them it's all about ideas.
- Heart/emotions people are all about **emotion**, their own and others'. They may or may not be empaths. Ideas and movement are less important.
- Body/sensation people revel in their five **physical senses**. But they may or may not be physically active. A hot bubble bath, for example, doesn't require you to move much.
- Body/movement people are the “just do it!” people. Thinking and emotions are not as important as physically **moving** their bodies in the world.
- Spirit/imagination people, interestingly, may or may not have imaginal smarts. But they are fascinated with the invisible **spiritual** aspect of things.

Personality: The Qualities of Self

When my kids were little, I read a book that changed my life and my parenting forever. In *Raising Your Spirited Children*, Mary Sheedy Kurchinka described children who she called “spirited” as “normal children who are more intense, persistent, sensitive, perceptive, and uncomfortable with change than other children.” She argued eloquently and compassionately for using a different, more positive kind of language for these kids. Instead of calling a child difficult, obstinate, and wild, for example, we can describe them as spirited, persistent and spontaneous. As she writes, “Thinking about the words we use to describe a child may seem silly and unnecessary to many, but the research demonstrates that our expectations and attitude strongly influence how we respond to a child. Our words do make a difference. In fact they make us act differently—more

friendly, supportive, and informative—and *as a result the kids are more successful.*” (Italics added) We discovered that we were raising two spirited kids – a spirited introvert and a spirited extrovert. (I’ll bet that, by now, you know which is which!) This book was exactly what we needed to see our kids’ qualities in a positive light. The traits that challenge us the most as parents are exactly the traits we would like them to have as adults – creative, goal-achieving, persistent, compassionate, and so on. Fortunately, Kurchinka also included very helpful strategies for parenting the spirited child who has these qualities! I highly recommend her book and blog.



Top Nine Holiday Survival-and-Joy Strategies for All Learning Styles

While specific strategies work for certain learning styles, there are some family strategies that are useful for all, but often overlooked. Here’s my list of favorites.

1. **Go into nature.** Humans evolved embedded in nature, walking 15 – 25 miles each day. When we don’t experience that, we suffer what Richard Louv termed “nature deficit disorder”, causing wide-spectrum stress that results in emotional, physical, social, and psychological issues. The antidote is simple – go for a hike and care for the Earth. It helps everything from AD/HD and sensory overload to anxiety and high blood pressure. Good for the soul too, and good for the Earth!
2. **Plan for energy/sensory/mindfulness breaks.** Helpful for everyone.
3. **Practice mindfulness and meditation.** All the research indicates these have many benefits, and there’s a meditation practice for everyone. Try visualizations, breath meditations, deep relaxation, moving meditations (yoga, tai chi, chi gung), Zentangles or mandala art, chanting, drumming, etc. See if there is one your whole family can do together. Magical.

4. **Loving-Kindness Meditation.** “May I be filled with Loving-Kindness. May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be happy.” Visualize yourself surrounded by white light & chant for yourself. Then think of a person who causes you discomfort, change “I” to “You” and visualize/chant for them.
5. **Create an “energy dial”.** Ronald Davis, in his book *The Gift of Dyslexia*, asks kids to imagine they have an inner “energy dial” with a scale of 0 – 10 on it. By visualizing their dial, they can assess the appropriate level for specific activities (sport=8, dinner=4), and set their dial as needed. It works!
6. **Practice gratitude and positivity.** Spend your days looking for things to appreciate about your kids and reflecting those back to them. See how many minutes/hours/days you can go saying only positive statements. Over time, expand how long you can go. Watch the effect on family dynamics.
7. **Schedule family councils.** Rules: Same time each week. Everyone can add to the agenda (which can include holiday plans) and has equal vote. No griping; only constructive proposals. Seek consensus on win-win solutions. During your council, **use a “talking stick”**. In their councils, Native Americans traditionally use a special stick or bowl to ensure each person gets a chance to speak their truth. Rules are simple: Pass it around the circle. Whoever has the stick or bowl speaks from the heart without interruption. Everyone else listens deeply with the heart.
8. **Brain Gym.** Great for sensory integration and stimulating learning. See this link for a great introduction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpSBTVFgK0Y>
9. ***The Parents Toolshop* book by Jody Johnston Pawel.** Truly, it’s the most comprehensive, research-driven, wise and user-friendly system for parenting I have ever read. (I wish I had written it.)

Above all – honor, cherish and respect your children as you wish to be honored, cherished and respected by them. Remember these are precious beings in your care and they are the future of our world. Enjoy them this holiday season!



These strategies for working with children who have differing learning styles have worked for the students and families I've been honored to teach, parent, and coach for more than 30 years. The team at Lotus Learning Power is committed to providing Whole Learning Coaching™ to youth (and their parents) who are bright but struggle with their learning because they have non-traditional learning styles in a traditional world.

Let me know what inspires and challenges you as you read this report. I'd love to hear from you, support you in parenting your amazing children, and *Empower your children to thrive and succeed in learning and life!*

**Please email me with any questions or feedback on this guide, or to set up your Personal Discovery Session with me so I can answer any questions you may have about how we can be of service to your child:
Info@LotusLearningPower.com**

**In my vision and in my heart,
I hold you and your children as being empowered.
I wish your Family Peace, Love, and Joy this Holiday Season!**

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