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INSIDE:

**Increasing
curiosity..... 2**

Elizabeth Reinsch,
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**Be considerate
about food
allergies when
hosting 3**

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Enjoying the holidays: Relatives and all

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It's holiday time again. Holidays remind me of birthdays and seem to be proportionate to age—the older you are, the faster they come.

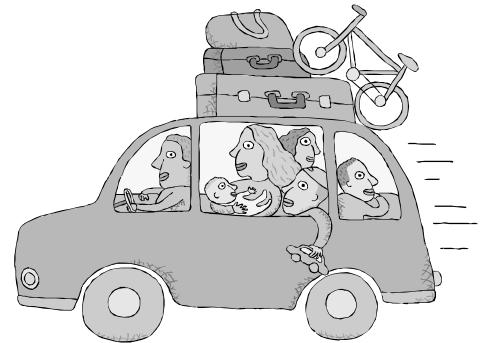
In a perfect world, our expectations of the holiday season would always be met. Gifts would fulfill dreams, turkeys would be moist and tasty, gravy would lack lumps, and relatives would love being in the company of each other.

Our world, of course, is not perfect. Not even close. Too often our holidays leave us with feelings of disappointment, frustration or even anger at those we call family.

It doesn't seem to matter how old we are, if we have a PhD, or even if we have three kids of our own. Put us with a group of parents, siblings, aunts and uncles and we become 10 years old again.

What is it about families! Why can't we feel competent, pretty, smart or accomplished when we're with them? Why do family dynamics not change along with us? And why does everything get worse during the holidays?

Let me attempt to answer the last question first because it's probably the easiest. The holidays have already put



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us on overload. We have too much to do, our expectations are way too high, and we are stressed to the max. Naturally, it won't take much to set us off. Just let mom tell me about the cobweb in the corner, or sis imply that my parenting skills are inferior!

Old dynamics continue to exist even in the most loving of families. Just as there are no perfect holidays, neither are there perfect families. You've probably had some negative experiences growing up. There were hurts, sibling conflicts and family power struggles.

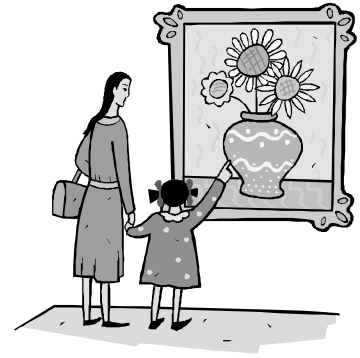
And, if you are honest with yourself, some of them are still unresolved.

Is there anything we can do to conquer these lumbering family dinosaurs that threaten the peace and joy we're told we should be feeling this time of year? I believe the answer is yes, but it will take some effort on our part.

(continued on page 4)

Increasing curiosity

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“To the mind, curiosity is its own reward. And the by-product of perpetual curiosity is wisdom.”

— Chip R. Bell
Author, Consultant, Speaker

When was the last time you spent time developing your own or someone else’s curiosity? Did you know that curiosity is a building block for motivation and reflective thinking? It helps us get involved and also helps us consider who we are and why we exist.

Focus on developing their curiosity—and your own. In the book *Handle With Care: Emotional Intelligence Activity Book*, by Freedman, Jensen, Rideout, and Freedman, the authors challenge readers, “So when you hear, ‘Why...why...how come...’ and your head is ready to pop, say, ‘That’s a good question, let’s figure it out.’”

From research we know that questions trigger the brain’s thinking processes. Three types of questions engage the brain in different ways: *factual* (“What is your dog’s name?”); *interpretive* (“Why do you think Mary is sitting on the steps?”); and *fusion* (“How would you teach Karen to be more responsible?”).

All questions, even those that may seem insignificant, lead

to thinking, yet 80 to 90 percent of questions are asked at the factual level.

Help your children and yourself to develop curiosity by reflecting on the world around you — and asking more questions!

Try the following activities to improve curiosity:

- **Ask children questions to which you do not know the answers.**
- **Browse in the library in the general reference section for question-and-answer books.**
One example is *When Do Fish Sleep? And Other Imponderables in Everyday Life* by David Feldman.
- **Create a special time, such as after dinner or while driving, to wonder.**
Wonder if computers really are like brains, how many lemonade stand sales it would take to pay the national debt, how much pollution would be cut if we all rode bikes to work and school once a

month. Wondering requires data, but it doesn’t matter if you are 100 percent accurate. Approximation is fine.

- **When driving somewhere, leave enough time to stop and explore.**
Read the historical marker signs, ask people about their town, and see where that road leads.
- **Suggest to the teacher that it would be fun (and valuable, research says) to have time where everyone in class can only ask questions.**
No answers, no discussion – just questions! When it works well, questions will lead to other questions in a reflective process.
- **Look at things differently.**
Carry a magnifying glass, borrow a telescope, lie on your back and look up, use a mirror and look backwards. See how the world looks from many perspectives.

The French essayist Michel de Montaigne wrote in the 16th century, “The world is but a school of inquiry.” Help your children and yourself to develop curiosity by reflecting on the world around you—and asking more questions!

Be considerate about food allergies when hosting



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Gourmet treats and holiday feasts are upon us. For those with food allergies, these holiday goodies harbor more hazards than hidden calories.

Although many food allergy reactions are relatively mild, some can be life threatening. Symptoms often appear within minutes, and include itching in the mouth, vomiting or diarrhea, asthma attacks, hives or in the worst case, anaphylaxis (difficulty breathing). *If someone exhibits these symptoms, get them immediate medical attention.*

Fortunately, true food allergies affect only about 2 percent of the population, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Most life-threatening reactions occur when eating away from home. People with known, diagnosed food allergies are wise to protect themselves by inquiring of restaurants and party hosts if any foods are prepared with the food to which they are allergic, so it can be avoided.

They should also carry an epinephrine pen and antihistamines so they can take prompt medical action if they accidentally ingest a reaction-causing food item.

Adults are most likely to be allergic to shellfish, such as shrimp, crawfish, lobster and crab; peanuts; fish; and eggs. Children are most commonly allergic to

eggs, milk, and peanuts. Parents of children with allergies are advised to check ahead for their children to make sure there are plenty of “safe” choices and to freeze or store meals and snacks so busy holiday schedules do not erode healthy eating habits.

Here are some suggestions to keep in mind when hosting get-togethers involving food, especially during the holiday season:

- **Help your guests identify food to which they may be allergic.** Thoughtfully answer questions about ingredients. Offerings at dinner parties do not have an ingredient label to guide a guest to a safe choice. Foods normally considered safe may have unsuspected ingredients, such as an oyster dressing in a Thanksgiving turkey. Do not take offense if the guest offers to bring an allergy-safe dish to share.
- **Save high-risk food offerings like peanut sauces or shellfish for smaller groups of people known not to have allergies.**
- **Consider garnishing foods with key ingredients to guide guests.** A few shrimp on top of a shrimp mold is an attractive way to alert all guests to the presence of shellfish.

Alternately, place cards with a descriptive name for each food on a buffet can cue all guests to make choices they will enjoy, as well as assist those with special diet considerations.

- **Avoid cross-contamination.** If someone with a known allergy will attend, be scrupulous about cleaning all equipment and serving dishes to avoid cross-contamination of the allergen to other foods.

Gourmet treats and holiday feasts are upon us. For those with food allergies, these holiday goodies harbor more hazards than hidden calories.

Those who regularly host a family member or friend with a severe food allergy can benefit from working closely with that individual to develop a small repertoire of recipes so their stays are safe and enjoyable.

A *Resource List on Food Allergies and Intolerances* is available from the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Information Center. It can be found online at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/bibs/gen/allergy.htm>.

Enjoying the holidays: Relatives and all

(continued from page 1)

- **Be ready for the inevitable.** You know Aunt Lulu will bring up your housekeeping skills. She does it every year. Be ready for it. And help your spouse prepare for Uncle Arthur's yearly dissertation on the correct way to carve a turkey. Practice your eye roll in advance. And laugh like crazy . . . within your head.
- **Remember, the only person you can change is yourself.** You can't change Great Uncle Harry or Brother Bob or Aunt Matilda. But you can change your reaction to them. Fighting is an act of cooperation. Don't cooperate. Next time Sister Sue says the dressing is a little dry, agree with her. Where can she go from there?
- **Have realistic expectations.** Mary Ellen Chase, author and educator, says that the holidays "are not a date, but a state of mind." We've already concluded that the holidays won't be perfect. So get ready to roll with the punches.



Do the best you can, be flexible, and make it as simple as possible. (Paper plates are really okay.)

- **The holidays are about family and friends.** It's probably not a good time to try to resolve all those old childhood issues. Save that for another, less stressful time. Instead, make up your mind to embrace the good your family offers, ignore what can't be changed, and enjoy the eccentricities that become wonderful family stories.



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