

## Over the River and Through the Woods

by Cheri L. Sheridan, M.Ed Behavioral and Educational Consultant The holiday trip to Grandma's house can be a curse or a blessing. To be a blessing, just remember two simple words: nurture and structure. The upcoming holidays are a time when those two key concepts can crumble like too-dry biscuit dough. Holidays mean parties, company, relatives and travel. We eat too much, drink too much, and get caught up in family drama and politics. We don't have much nurturing energy left over for our children...and then wonder why they are whiny, sassy or bossy. If you think you are over the competitiveness with your siblings, give it a chance to come out in the next generation! You can count on the silent comparisons between cousins and grandchildren. Go into the round of family visits with your eyes and your heart wide open. If you react to unspoken resentments, power plays and rivalries, your children will reflect that like a beacon. Appreciate the preciousness of your children and wish others well. Children get lots of nurture from well-meaning relatives. But, routines and reliability falter. Children crave structure to feel emotionally safe. Does this sound familiar?

- "Oh, let her stay up until her aunt gets here. Rosa is going to be so disappointed if she doesn't see her tonight!"

- "You come here and see Grandma. You don't have to drink milk with dinner at Grandma and Pop's."

- "We are going to Randy's office party. Just let the kids stay up until we get home. Don't bother with the bath and PJ routine. They can just lie on the sofa and watch TV."

- "Now don't be silly. Their cousins don't have to ride their bikes with helmets. Nothing is going to happen! You worry too much." The brain seeks patterns. It is the way the brain is most efficient as it processes a steady bombardment of information. This is especially true of young children. Their brains work significantly harder than adults. So, if in the first example, we keep a youngster up until a relative arrives, the child misses the set bedtime, gets tired and miserable. Aunt Rosa ends up seeing a cranky, now shy and generally out-of-sorts child. You feel embarrassed and react accordingly. Keep bedtimes, naps and awakening times consistent. Resist the urge to let the kids stay up and play while the adults talk into the night. If your child becomes more wired as she gets tired, insist on bedtime at night or quiet time at mid day. Children need to decompress and rest. At bedtime, whether with relatives or in a hotel, replicate the rituals. Bath, PJ's, tooth brushing, story reading, back-patting. Whatever you do at home, do on the road. Conflict with grandparents is inevitable. Pick your battles. If a "no soda" rule reigns at your house and it is important to you, let Grandma know ahead of time. "We want Jason to drink milk at meals. Can you support us in that?" An alternative is to put parameters on the limit. People love choices. Ask Grandma to have milk or juice available. It is her choice. Or, since you can't change Grandma, you can only change yourself; bring along juice boxes and bottled water. Grandparents want to spoil and be remembered. Ask Grandma to buy some Hershey's syrup. A little chocolate milk isn't the end of the world. Avoid the power struggle that just adds tension and makes your child more likely to act out. Guilt infiltrates the holidays. You can't see it, but it permeates the air like the smell of potpourri. Open houses, office parties, shopping trips to the mall take you away from your children. You feel guilty, bend the rules and ruin the routine. Remember the old saying. "Children want your presence, not presents." Spend half the money and twice the time. Resist the urge to say yes to every invitation. And, when you have to say "yes", keep the constancy. Don't get caught by your conscience. As adults, our number one job is to keep our children safe. Say that to yourself. "My number one job is to keep my children safe." That rule will work well into the college years! You can argue about drinking milk, eating veggies, brushing teeth, but when it comes to safety, the line is drawn and there is no crossing it. Seatbelts, handholding, bike helmets or strangers, there is NO discussion. "My number one job is to keep my children safe. Jason will wear a helmet or he cannot go bike-riding." Period. Maintaining rituals, picking battles, ignoring guilt and assuring safety are four gifts you can give yourself this holiday season. The more confidence you have, the more calmness you convey to your children. Enjoy the trip to grandma's house! Cheri Sheridan, M.Ed is a behavioral and educational consultant. She teaches a program called Conscious Discipline and works with school systems around the country as a motivational educator. Her two children, Carter, 12, and Nelson, 14, are her greatest teachers! She can be reached at 540-327-1842.