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Making Safe and Smart Toy Choices

National Safe Toys and Gifts Awareness Month is observed in December each year to raise awareness about the importance of selecting safe and appropriate toys and gifts for children during the holiday season and beyond.

Buying safe and age-appropriate toys can be a challenge, but there are some steps you can take to ensure that you are making the right choices this holiday season:



Read the labels: Look for age recommendations and warnings on the packaging of the toy. Make sure the toy is appropriate for the age and developmental level of the child you are buying for.



Check for choking hazards: Avoid toys with small parts or that can easily break into small pieces, as these can be choking hazards, especially for young children.



Look for safety certifications: Look for toys that have been tested and certified by reputable organizations such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) or ASTM International. These certifications indicate that the toy meets certain safety standards.



Consider the child's interests: Choose toys that match the child's interests and abilities. For example, a child who enjoys building may enjoy a set of blocks, while a child who loves to read may enjoy a new book.



Beware of toxic materials: Avoid toys that contain toxic materials such as lead or phthalates, which can be harmful to children.



Check for recalls: Check the Consumer Product Safety Commission website for any recalls or safety alerts related to the toy you are considering purchasing.



Spreading Joy: Five Ways to Focus on Others

The holidays are a great time to shift our focus to others and spread joy and kindness. Focusing on others can have numerous benefits for both the giver and the receiver, including increased happiness and life satisfaction.

Here are some small ways to focus on others during the holiday season:

- 1. Send holiday cards.** Sending a heartfelt message to loved ones can brighten their day and show them that you're thinking of them.
- 2. Donate to a charity.** Giving back to those in need can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Consider donating to a local charity or volunteering your time.
- 3. Cook for others.** Prepare a meal or some treats for your friends, family or neighbors. It's a thoughtful way to show your appreciation and spread some cheer.
- 4. Offer a helping hand.** Help out someone in need, whether it's shoveling their driveway, running an errand or offering a listening ear.
- 5. Share traditions.** Share a holiday tradition with others, whether it's baking cookies, decorating the tree or watching a favorite holiday movie. It can bring people together and create lasting memories.

By taking small actions to focus on others during the holidays, we can spread kindness and joy and make a positive impact on those around us.



Self-Care: Five Ways to Take Care of Yourself This Season

The holidays are a time for gratitude and spending time with loved ones, but don't put your own needs on the back burner. Mental health experts stress that taking care of yourself during the busy holiday season is crucial for your mental and emotional well-being. **After all, how can we truly show up for others when we're exhausted, on edge or overwhelmed?**

Practicing self-care can help us maintain a sense of calm and balance, no matter how hectic the festivities might get. Here are some strategies to try:

- 1. Get enough sleep.** To ensure you get enough sleep, try to maintain a regular sleep schedule, avoid caffeine and alcohol before bedtime, create a relaxing sleep environment and limit screen time before bed.
- 2. Set boundaries.** It's okay to say no to certain events or obligations if they are causing you stress or overwhelming you. Prioritize your time and energy on the things that matter most to you.
- 3. Take a break.** If you need a break from the chaos, take some time to go for a walk or find a quiet spot to relax and recharge. Sometimes self-care can be as simple as taking a few minutes to stop, sit and breathe.
- 4. Practice gratitude.** Studies have indicated that practicing gratitude has numerous benefits, including optimizing our cardiac health, reducing anxiety and depression, sharpening our brain function and giving us peace of mind. Jot down a few things you're grateful for in a journal, or on little slips of paper, then put them in a jar and set aside time to revisit them. Or, simply begin your day by thinking about someone or something you truly appreciate.
- 5. Let go of expectations and perfection.** Maybe you've painted a picture in your mind of the perfect holiday, but things rarely go exactly as planned. Letting go of expectations can be a liberating experience that allows us to live more fully in the present moment. By focusing on what we can control and accepting what we cannot, we can reduce stress and open ourselves up to new possibilities and opportunities.

By practicing self-care during the holidays, you can reduce stress and anxiety, and enjoy the holiday season to its fullest.

Protect Yourself and Others: Get Your Seasonal Vaccines

Make sure you and your family are safe, healthy and well-protected during the winter months and beyond. If you haven't had your flu shot, consider scheduling it today!

Rest Easy: Getting Good Sleep

It can be easy to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of shopping, decorating and socializing. However, amidst all the excitement and festivities, it's important not to neglect the most fundamental aspect of self-care: getting enough sleep.

The National Sleep Foundation provides helpful strategies for being your "Best Slept Self®" this season:

- **Set a sleep schedule.** Wake up and go to bed at the same time every day, even on the weekends. Most adults need 7–9 hours of sleep each night and children and teens need 8–11 hours.
- **Make a sleep-friendly bedroom.** Sleep in a darkened, quiet room and keep the room temperature between 60 to 67 degrees. You might also need to change your sheets or blankets to fit the weather.
- **Maintain healthy habits.** Spend some time outside each day to get sunlight exposure. Exercising can also promote better sleep. Finish eating and drinking 2–3 hours before you go to bed.

By following these tips, you can ensure that you get the restful sleep you need to enjoy the holiday season to the fullest. **Happy holidays and sweet dreams!**



Keeping Fit and Healthy During a Busy December

Exercising during a hectic December can be challenging, but it's essential for your physical and mental well-being. Remember that exercise doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing approach. **Even a little bit of activity is better than none at all.**

Exercise almost always takes a back seat unless you make a plan. Schedule your exercise time and stick to it. Add it to your calendar just as you would a business appointment — after all, your health is important.

Even the best laid plans can go awry, so if you can't stick to your usual exercise routine, be flexible and try something different. Maybe you can't get to the gym, but you can still take a brisk walk outside or do a workout at home. If your time is limited, focus on short, intense workouts that can be completed in 30 minutes or less. This way, you can still get your exercise in without sacrificing other important tasks.

One way to make it easier to show up at the gym — and even have fun — is to find a workout partner. Exercising with a friend or family member can be a great motivator. Plus, you can hold each other accountable and stay on track.

Staying active during the holidays can help you feel better both physically and mentally. So, make sure to carve out time for exercise, even if it's just a short walk or quick workout. Your body and mind will thank you for it.



Maintain, Don't Gain: Tips for Mindful Celebrations

Preventing weight gain during the holiday season can be challenging, but it's possible with a combination of mindful eating, portion control and staying active. **Here are some tips to help you maintain your weight throughout the holidays:**

- 1. Plan ahead:** Before attending a holiday event, have a light, healthy snack to curb your appetite. This can help prevent overeating when faced with tempting treats.
- 2. Be mindful of portions:** Use smaller plates to help control portion sizes, and avoid going back for seconds. Fill your plate with mostly vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains, leaving a smaller space for indulgent foods.
- 3. Savor your food:** Eat slowly and enjoy each bite, focusing on the flavors and textures. This can help you feel satisfied with less food and prevent overeating.
- 4. Choose healthier alternatives:** Opt for healthier versions of your favorite holiday treats by using whole grains, reducing sugar and incorporating healthier fats.
- 5. Limit alcohol consumption:** Alcoholic beverages can add empty calories and lower your inhibitions, leading to increased food intake. Enjoy alcoholic beverages in moderation or choose low-calorie options like wine spritzers or light beer.

By incorporating these strategies, you can enjoy the holiday season without packing on the pounds, ensuring a healthier — and happier — start to the new year.



Smart Holiday Spending: How to Create a Budget and Stick to It

It's easy to overspend during the holidays, especially if you enjoy watching the delight of someone receiving a present you know they'll love. Whether you tend to go overboard on gifts, there are ways to find a balance between keeping your budget and enjoying the holiday season.

Here are ways to get started.

Make a list, complete with amounts. Create a list or Excel spreadsheet with the name of every person you plan to buy a gift. Decide your total amount for gifts and divide this number across each name. As you purchase gifts, add the actual spending amount to the list to track your budget.

Start early. One of the surest ways to overspend is to wait until the last minute and buy all your gifts in a rush. Not only are you more likely to overspend, but it also makes an already stressful time of the year even more so.

Be flexible. Rather than feeling that each person on your list must have one specific gift, regardless of cost, come up with a few different options. Look for ways to save money on holiday expenses. Consider making gifts instead of buying them, hosting potluck dinners instead of preparing a full meal or traveling during off-peak times to save on airfare and hotel costs.

Avoid shopping sprees. Merchants are really good at enticing people to buy. Everything from display placement to lighting and music is designed to trigger impulse purchases. Researchers have dubbed this the "shopping momentum effect," noting we're more likely to keep spending once we've gotten started. Enjoy the displays but stick to your shopping list. Leave the store for a few minutes if you're tempted to make off-list purchases.