



## Visions of Sugar Plums: Keeping Kids on Track Before the Holidays

Jo Ann Flaxbeard – Boys Town National Training

’Twas the weeks before Christmas, when all through the school  
Every creature was stirring, which was the general rule:  
Our books were shoved in our desks without care,  
In hopes that vacation soon would be here:  
The children were active to a great height  
With visions of sugar plums, and no end in sight.”

The time between the end of October and winter break can be an especially exhausting and trying time during the school year for both teachers and students. Most think that when students get “visions of sugarplums” dancing in their heads, that both academic and social and emotional learning slows down or stops, taking a back seat to the upcoming holidays. But that doesn’t have to be the case if you keep the following suggestions in mind.

1. **Maintain a consistent schedule as much as possible.**

Students of all ages and abilities are more likely to be successful when their school day follows a predictable pattern. For most teachers, maintaining a consistent schedule is fairly easy throughout August and September. However, once October and November roll around there can be many interruptions to disrupt a typical school day. Special parties or events, practices and performances of holiday programs, and the occasional day off school due to inclement weather are just a few of the many distractions that can occur. Keeping your schedule as close to “normal” as possible helps students stay on track both academically and behaviorally. When your schedule has the potential to or does go off track, be sure to prepare your students ahead of time. Just knowing that the school day may not flow normally may help alleviate stress and anxiety in students that are affected adversely by an unpredictable day.

2. **Continue with rigorous academic learning.**

Sometimes it seems there is never enough time to teach students everything they need to know. Even though days in school and schedules are disrupted, it is important to keep a momentum of rigorous learning. Time constraints and student engagement can vary significantly during this time of year. However, this is not a valid reason to disrupt productive and purposeful learning. Instead, you may need to chunk academic learning. One strategy that may help is to present students with

smaller amounts of academic content, but give them more time to process, practice and apply learning.

3. **Continue with rigorous social and emotional learning.**

Now is a great time to assess the progress your students have made learning appropriate social skills. Recognize and celebrate strengths. Reteach and practice challenges. This time of year also provides excellent opportunities for teachers to help students refine previously-taught skills, enhance and advance skills already taught, and learn new social skills. Perhaps you may have to reteach skills your students have previously been successful with. It is not unusual for students who have other things on their minds to “forget” how to follow instructions or stay on task. Perhaps you can enhance and advance skills by teaching students how to apply skills in new and different settings. It is possible that getting an adult’s attention might look different when students are outside of their classroom and dealing with an adult that is not their teacher. And finally, perhaps new situations may arise that may provide an opportunity to teach a new skill. Maybe you have taught your students how to greet others and now you find they need instruction on how to say good-bye to guests who have come to visit. All of this can be done in those moments when you have a few minutes to fill when your schedule does change. Use our free lesson plan on [code switching](#) to help students apply social skills to new situations.

4. **Praise students when they do the right thing.**

Too often during this stressful time of the year, it’s easy to fall back on old habits. Adults tend to revert back to correcting more than they are praising, and students can tend to revert back to inappropriate behaviors that served them well in the past. Take heart that this is usually just a temporary set-back. Here at Boys Town we recommend four positives for every correction. It may be a good idea to increase that ratio in order to consistently prompt students to apply appropriate behavior skills they have learned. Of course, don’t wait for them to be perfect before you praise! Praising approximations of desired behaviors can be very powerful. Get more [tips on praise](#) here!

And don’t forget to **enjoy the excitement and enthusiasm of your students**. Doing so may help to continue building those strong positive teacher and student relationships. Take the time to share and revel in the delights that your students experience. After all, it is truly the “most wonderful time of the year.”