



# HANDLING FORCED AFFECTION DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holiday season is a time for many Oklahomans to see extended family and friends. In some cases, those family members from afar come here to visit, while other families pack their bags to head out on a holiday adventure.

For some children, these visits can mean lots of hugs and kisses from well-meaning family members and friends, said Laura Hubbs-Tait, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension parenting specialist.

"A lot of families have an aunt, uncle, grandparent or cousin who insists on kissing your children when they see them. But keep in mind it's perfectly OK for your child to say no, even if that runs the risk of hurting the relative's feelings," Hubbs-Tait said. "It's never acceptable for parents to force children to hug and kiss someone they don't want to. This is sending the message that parents approve of forced physical contact or affection."

So, how do you handle those situations when they arise? Hubbs-Tait said there are a couple of different options.

First, help your child or grandchild understand what is comfortable and not comfortable for them.

"This dialogue helps the child validate their feelings," she said. "Another helpful tip, especially if you don't see certain family members and friends very often, is to show them pictures of these people and name the relatives and their relationship to the child. Encourage the child to talk about what they remember from their last visit with the people in the photos."

Parents also can say to a child that Aunt Susie or Uncle Bob will want to give them a hug and add "how do you feel about that?" Ask if the child would be more comfortable shaking hands or even giving a high five.

"It's important to open the dialogue and ensure your child that you respect their feelings and support their decisions in how to greet relatives," Hubbs-Tait said.

On the flip side of that coin, communicate ahead of time with family members the wishes of your child. Put a positive spin on it to help avoid hurt feelings.

"You can say something like, Alex doesn't really like to kiss people, but he's developed a special fist bump as a way of greeting everyone," she said. "This way you're respecting both sides of the situation."

Another option is to have the child or the adult relative bring something to share, such as a book they can read together. And, with small children, remember to get down to their level – sitting on the floor with them is great! It is important for everyone to feel comfortable in these family get-together situations.

"The holidays are about enjoying everyone's company and spending time together with family and friends," Hubbs-Tait said. "Setting some boundaries ahead of time will help ensure it's a memorable holiday for everyone."

