

Time is Best Gift for Children in Busy Holiday Weeks

by Maureen Hammond-Kashdan and Wendell Anderson

For many people, the holiday season can be a time of turmoil. Along with work, household duties and caring for the children comes the extra burden of the holidays. Instead of experiencing the warmth, love, and good cheer associated with the season, parents often feel confused, frustrated, stressed, and guilt-ridden.

The fact is, a simple, joyful holiday season is attainable. The challenge for parents is to remind themselves and to teach their children what this holiday season is all about. Some suggestions for doing this are:

Give yourself and others permission to be less than perfect. Parents often have too many unrealistic expectations during the holidays. If you can remember there is no such thing as a perfect holiday or perfect family, you will be far ahead of the game. We often have this idea that once during the year, everything will go beautifully—no family conflicts, no overly tired children—when, in fact, the opposite may be true. Recognize that no one can live up to expectations for the holiday season.

Identify which holiday traditions have meaning for your family. Habits often masquerade as traditions, and you may find your family repeating rituals without a sense of meaning or purpose. Additionally, young couples bring different family traditions to their partnerships, and some never establish their own. Keep those traditions you truly value, and you might even dare to establish some new ones.

Include all family members in holiday preparations. Because this time of year can be so hectic, parents may unintentionally isolate their children during the holidays. Baking, shopping, gift wrapping, and planning are assumed to be adult tasks. Children need to be involved in the preparations. Suggest that your children help bake cookies and design their own wrapping paper. Allow them to decide with you how to spend your time together.

Send cards throughout the year. Many of us get caught up in the holiday card exchange. Sometimes this ritual only adds expense and stress to the season. People are so busy trying to read a multitude of cards that they may not have time for yours. How about spacing your cards out? One card in February may be more appreciated than 50 in December.

Maintain your routine. Maintaining a routine relieves stress and helps you stay organized. Children especially need routine. Children can feel anxious at this time of year, partly because their parents are so busy and often deviate from the meaningful rituals. Children count on some sameness and order in their lives.

Maintain a healthy diet, exercise, and get adequate rest. Easier said than done. Excesses are part of the season, and we are all entitled to treats. Certain foods and drinks are taken only at this time of year and are looked forward to. You should feel free to partake, but moderation or abstinence (no drinking if driving) is the best policy.

Additionally, try not to let holiday activities call a halt to your exercise program. Exercise relieves stress and helps keep off unwanted weight.

Spread merrymaking across the season. The holiday frenzy builds up over several months, an eternity for a child, then suddenly, the day after Christmas, it's over. No more get-togethers, no more treats, no more festive music, no more seasonal specials

on television. Most of us experience a letdown on December 26. The post-holiday syndrome is very real. How about carrying on some activities after the height of the holiday season? Bake another batch of cookies, rent a holiday movie or invite friends over to celebrate as you take down the tree.

Teach your children the true meaning of the holidays and giving. This is truly very personal as families have their own beliefs about the way they do or do not celebrate this time of year. In any case, you as a parent have to win over the commercialism. Children's logic says the bigger the present, the more you must love them.

Show your children in your own creative way and style that presents are not an indication of how much they are loved.

Consider alternative gifts. Homemade gifts made by adults or children are rewarding to give and wonderful to receive. Everyone has talents and this is an opportune time to showcase them.

How about giving an autobiography to your parents or a poem to a special friend? A coupon book given to an adult friend or spouse might be redeemed for a day off from household responsibilities, breakfast in bed, help with a house over yard project, or a special dinner prepared, delivered, and served.

For children, a coupon book might include offerings of a trip to the zoo or museum, a friend over for the night, a movie rental, a day off from chores, or selection of a dinner menu.

Spend time with your family and loved ones. Children remember, appreciate and love family activities more than the money spent on them. This becomes clear when you listen to adults as they reminisce about their holiday memories. More often than not, the fond memories are of family traditions and the time spent with parents rather than the material things they received. Throughout their lives, your children will remember and cherish the games you played with them. The time you went out and cut the tree, the sledding, the making of the snowman, looking at the holiday decorations, walking and hiking, special cuddly story times—in essence, relaxed and freely given time is what children of any age need and want most.

A happy and healthy holiday season to you all!

When they co-authored this article for the Birth To Three column in The Register-Guard, Maureen Hammond-Kashdan was a work and family coordinator and parent education instructor at Lane Community College. Wendell Anderson was a communications specialist at the LCC Small Business Development Center.