



the importance of **HOLIDAY TRADITIONS**

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"But we always have mixed nuts at Thanksgiving!"

"But we always have turkey for Christmas dinner!"

"But we always have the youngest child open the first Hanukkah present (this protested by the youngest)!"

"But we always go to grandma's for New Year's Day!"

Any parent who has ever tried to change anything on a holiday will hear a chorus of "always." Do something two years in a row on a given holiday and you're doomed to do it forever, or so it seems. If, like me, you thrive

on novelty and change, the insistence of kids that you make every holiday a rerun can be exasperating.

The truth is that I enjoy certain rituals as much as the next person. But the kids' demands for continuity and sameness got me to thinking about what traditions associated with holidays are all about.

There seems to be something very basic in the human soul that craves some predictability and some

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YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

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Q: How can my family establish our own traditions at the holidays?

A: Establishing family traditions creates a sense of unity within your household or among your neighbors, co-workers, and friends. It gives us something to look forward to each holiday season and gives us memories to share and pass along to future generations. Some of us don't have many (or any) established traditions, or we simply do not like the ones that we've been carrying on.

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recognition that we move in concert with the seasons. Name a culture where there aren't markers for the passing of time. We may do it differently – family to family, country to country – but, where there are people, there seems to be annual feast days, holidays, holy days, and rest days. The need to ritualize them with predictable activities, foods, and/or objects seems to be universal.

My theory is that these markers of time are a fundamental way that we all have to make the unpredictability and stress of daily life bearable. At the most basic level, holidays give us some comfort and strength from the simple observance that we've made it once more around the calendar.

On a more complex level, they provide a culturally sanctioned reason for everyone to stop, to take stock of ourselves, to acknowledge who we've chosen to be in our families and communities, to underline for ourselves how we are doing, to make new promises to self and others. There is no way for even the most jaded person to avoid it. To be cranky about a holiday and to decide not to observe it still observes it and brings to awareness one's relationship to others.

Kids intuitively understand all this complicated stuff. Sometimes what they latch on to as recognition of the event can be a little weird, but the impulse to mark the passing of



- **Holidays are not an “extra.”** They are essential markers in the rhythm of life.
- **Embrace holidays.** There are never enough reasons to celebrate life.
- If you don't like the commercialism that's come to surround some holidays, **make up your own traditions.**
- **Be thoughtful** about the values and traditions that you want to pass on to your children through your holiday activities.
- **Include your children** in the planning, creating, cooking, storytelling, gifting, visiting, etc. Kids who are part of it all will know how to carry it on when it is their turn.

time with some kind of gathering and observance is a healthy one. Anything positive, done regularly, puts something important in the child's internal “security bank”; emotional steadiness that can be drawn on in more difficult times. Kids may not be able to explain it, but they do know they need it. It's important that we understand that their requests for sameness aren't just inconvenient foibles but are a reflection of kids' legitimate needs for security.

As parents, we can do a great deal to make sure that that inner bank of love and security has a healthy balance by the time they leave our care. Family traditions around holidays are one of the means we have for letting children know that they are embedded in community, for witnessing their growth over time, and for passing on important cultural and family values.

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YOUR QUESTIONS CONT.

My childhood holidays were filled with a mixture of joy and angst. There came the wide-eyed excitement of the first simmering kettle of hot apple cider with mulling spices, trick-or-treating with my brothers, the first flurries, and the anticipation for crossing the road to race down the sledding hill. There also came a lot of uncertainty and stress in our home, which seemed to magnify as winter approached. My father struggled with substance abuse, and my mother worked two or three jobs trying to make ends meet. My brothers and I spent a lot of time on our own. When my parents were both around, they often fought. Money was tight; sometimes our cooking stove was the only source of heat until we could purchase more fuel or get another load of wood.

We didn't really have any family traditions, like baking cookies together or decorating. One year, when I was about 10 years old, I drug my little brother down to our line of evergreens two days before Christmas, sawed our own tree down and made him help me drag it up the hill to the house!

As an adult, and now a mother myself, I've learned that I can create joy in my family's life – so I've worked on establishing traditions that I longed for as a child, and that we truly enjoy doing as a family. We go around the table and say what we're grateful for at dinner time and, in our home, we add prayers. We take slow drives gazing at Christmas lights in quiet neighborhoods when the snow is softly falling. About five years ago, we started ringing the bell each year, and now my younger brother joins us. We skate with Santa each year at our local indoor ice rink.

Is money tight? Traditions on a budget are the best ones, anyhow! Going “leaf-crunching” is one of my favorite fall traditions that I enjoy with my 8-year old daughter. She was just old enough to walk when we first started these strolls. Now she initiates these walks most any time that we spot crispy leaves that are just ripe for crunching. I love that we can enjoy a simple, free activity together, sans electronics. Here are some more ideas to inspire you: <https://littlebinsforlittlehands.com/easy-family-holiday-traditions-on-a-budget>.

I also ditched some of the things that we had felt pressured to do, but which only added stress to our lives. It may have disappointed others, but we needed to create healthy boundaries for our family. Do what brings you joy, and don't be afraid to get rid of things that don't, even if they have been traditions.

What new holiday tradition will you cultivate this season that fills your family's bucket?