

Making Holidays Enjoyable

By Dale Simpson, Ph.D.

The time between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day is not normal. In it we find thoughtful celebrations, special football games, and the biggest advertising blitzes of the year. We enjoy special time visiting seldom seen family members as we play out family rituals and remembrances of times long ago. During your holiday season, you might want to reflect upon the following points:

1. When visiting family and the homes in which we grew up, there is a marked tendency toward psychological regression. Watch for unintended repetitions of old patterns, such as arguing, trying to please or impress, slipping into a childlike role with parents, and power struggles over decision making. Sometimes this can lead to stress being displaced upon other people with whom we don't have issues. It can also lead to ignoring our parental or marital obligations because we are hooked into an emotional dance with our family of origin. Don't let this get in your way. Be careful as you enter an old family domain. You may want to use this time to ask your extended family about their early Christmas or holiday memories. This can impart important knowledge of loved ones and keep you out of emotional traps with your family.
2. Be sure that in our enjoyment of the holidays, we extend sensitivity to others who may be grieving. People who are dealing with major grief over the last three or four years, particularly the last year, have a hard time with holidays. These grief experiences could be from divorce, the loss of a loved one, or loss of functioning (sudden disability). Privately acknowledging your concern to a grieving person and how you know this time might be hard on them can really help. Care should be taken to give them the emotional space to get through the time rather than try hard to cheer them up. Helping them avoid being alone is a good gesture.
3. Enjoy family time but avoid the pressure to make things happen in a perfect way. If you remember fondly many great holiday times as a child, that is wonderful. But we do not need to press to make this happen for our children or grandchildren, thinking that if they do not get this experience, they will be neglected. This driven-ness can make holidays too stressful and we no longer experience the important things but focus upon some memory we're trying to re-create. Why do our children sometimes associate holidays with the pressure of running around, being late, and ongoing emotional conflict? Comfortable, happy children are more important than a perfectly decorated home full of homemade everything, including homemade strife.

4. A few rituals and family traditions are very good to psychologically anchor particular meaning we are conveying and celebrating. These traditions can include following an Advent calendar leading up to Christmas, special ways you share gifts, special meals, etc. They may include going to a certain friend or family member's house. These things can help firmly established the meaning of the season as long as they are in a form relevant to a child's life.

One thing we do is use an Advent candle with numbers written down the side, marking the days leading to Christmas morning. Over four weeks, each child gets to light and monitor the burning candle, blowing it out at the right time and creating anticipation.

5. Gift giving can be a special thing. Taking into account a person's feelings and particular likes and dislikes reflects the very personal nature of God to us in the Christmas story of Christ coming into the world. A modest, yet very personalized gift is a powerful statement of affirmation.

I have found the best thing for gifts is buying them months in advance. I remember my mother-in-law even bought things during the after-Christmas sales for the following Christmas. Buying modestly, personally, and before the last minute can only help you appreciate the holidays.

6. Secular or non-Christian parents can review with their children the Christmas story and what it means to Christians all over the world. You can reflect upon why the holiday is so important to Christians and what is their world view regarding God's nature and redemption.

7. You don't have to visit everyone every year. Take it easy and refuse to get hooked into potential jealousies about who spent time with whom and for how long. Honor people and enjoy their company, but maintain the freedom to do what is helpful for your family functioning and not so stressed that more harm than good comes out of these visits.

Of course, we want to remind ourselves to focus upon the meaning of the season and not upon the frantic consumerism and materialism. It seems to be harder and harder as time goes by to escape the pressure our buying culture creates. Black Friday and Cyber Monday are celebrated as times to gorge ourselves. Then, interestingly, the Tuesday that follows is a day to think of supporting good, non-profit causes. So after you add significant debt to your credit cards (the real important thing!), do you want to give away money? Sad.

Amazingly, Halloween is now the second biggest holiday in the country. Actually, Black Friday is running neck and neck. Sounding like a grumpy old man, I have to admit a certain amount of bracing and resistance when November rolls around. I've thought, rather implausibly, that we Christians ought to move Christmas to a more neutral date

that has not been purchased by companies; say, March 20th. Then we could celebrate unencumbered by the distractions that have built up over the years. Oh, well, it's just a thought.

May your holiday season be filled with true peace as you share with your little ones what real life is all about.

Dale Simpson, PhD, is the father of five grown children. As a practicing psychologist for more than 36 years, he has counseled children, teens, adults and couples and is currently practicing in Venice, Florida. Dr. Simpson was a co-founder and publisher of Homeschooling Today Magazine, wrote a column called Inside the Family for the magazine, served as a featured speaker at numerous state homeschooling and parenting conferences, and is the publisher of Learning for Life Press. A Study in Wisdom, Homeschooling for Life, The Easy to Make Paper Airplane Book, and the **Think It, Feel It, Say It Board Game** are published by Learning for Life Press. Sign up for our free newsletter and also drop by for free articles on family life. www.learningforlifepress.com

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