

Creating a peaceful, meaningful Christmas

Christmas time can be stressful and crass as a result of the commercialisation of what was once a religious holy day. However in our own families we can plan to bring good sense, beauty and meaning back into Christmas and truly make it into a festival of love, so that the warm memories of this festival can sustain us through our lives, even when times are hard. Increasingly families are rationalising present giving, food preparation and times of Christmas gatherings to make it more suitable for the season (summer in Australia and the Southern Hemisphere), in ever more hectic times and in consideration of children's needs. The following strategies are worth considering in helping to make Christmas sane and beautiful! They include reducing the stress on you and the children as well as ways to enrich the Christmas celebration. It is written particularly, but not exclusively, for those in the Southern Hemisphere.

Part 1. Finding Peace: reducing the stress of Christmas

1. Meeting your family's needs first

Put yourself and your children first in making decisions for the Christmas period. Do what is best for each of your children and yourself, each year, as they grow. Don't compromise this special time and your own well-being for the sake of others. Driving from one side of a city to the other on one day, to meet the expectations of both sides of the extended family is usually insanity with small children, already over-excited by visits from Santa Claus! Negotiate other better ways of seeing people at Christmas.

If no compromises can be reached, some families just go away for Christmas, to break the expectations of joining multiple family gatherings. Extending 'Christmas' beyond one day perhaps embracing Christmas Eve, the important European day for Christmas celebrations, or including some of the 12 days of Christmas, also helps to negotiate more sensible arrangements with families and can make it ultimately more enjoyable for everyone.

2. Adult stress

The Christmas period is one of the most stressful times of the year especially on women who most often "carry" Christmas, but also for men and children. The best way to work towards a peaceful Christmas is to look at ways

you can minimise the factors that add stress at Christmas. In Australia and the Southern hemisphere stress is compounded by it being the end of the school year and a time of annual holidays for many

Identify what stresses you and your family at Christmas

List (and thereby acknowledge and be more mindful of) the stresses you and your family are under in the period leading up to Christmas. Begin with all the end-of-year work pressures on adults, as well as end-of-year school concerts, plays, excursions, camps, exams etc as well as the preparation of gifts and food for Christmas itself; also consider the Christmas drinks with workmates, neighbours and the preparation for annual holidays, often spent away from home. Remember that anticipation of both the “good” and the “not so good” can be stressful for children and us.

Consider your needs

Children absorb and reflect our stress and our state of well being. For your own sake and for theirs, consider what you need for you to feel together and inwardly at peace? Are you able at Christmas to take your time to enjoy the beauty

of the moment? Do you want to? What do you need to do to make it possible? Don't forget good sleep, that much neglected healer.

Then look at what happens at Christmas itself. Ask what you can do to eliminate some of those stresses from your Christmas period this year. What do you want? What is important? What can you let go? Ask: does it really matter if we don't do this, this minute, this year? There is always next year. Are there other ways of doing some of it in less stressful ways? (For example, delaying some things until after the Christmas-New Year holiday.)

Consider the adult relationship stresses

For those involved in a big extended family Christmas, tension can arise due to differing values and expectations concerning Christmas. In addition, relationship conflicts between particular members of the family are also more common than you might think; Christmas only exacerbates these tensions because it “forces” people to be together when they would really

rather not be. It may help to talk about potential problems, needs and expectations well beforehand (e.g. about organisation of the day itself: food, presents, some order in the present giving, making some quiet times for children in the family day; or about rescheduling some things.

Dealing with the ‘presents problem’

One of the main areas of stress at Christmas is the expectations around giving presents. Many families are re-negotiating the present problem to cut down on the number of presents or the kinds of presents given. Some families might choose a name out of a hat of the person for whom they will get a present that year; this may

be done earlier in the year so there is not a last minute rush to find a present. Some families decide ‘no presents for adults’. Some families all put in money to get one good present for each person. Some families say no individual presents but instead give a big donation to a

charity of some sort instead. Some families just keep the present giving for birthdays.

One family decided that the present for the one person they were to find a present for had to be made by themselves. This is certainly an effective way to take the commercialisation out of Christmas and bring love back in. When we are looking at Christmas being a celebration of love the idea of making presents ourselves to give others dear to us gives children a very different message about Christmas. Then it becomes a time to truly give of oneself— one's time, one's talent, one's thoughtfulness, one's love. We call them "Love gifts".

"Love gifts" are gifts made as a result of our own efforts and thoughtfulness - they become symbols of the love we have for each other. Such gifts do not have to be expensive or even "material" to be treasured. We can make a gift of our own artistic work of music, or poetry, stories and dramatic performances and we can still value these in our family as "gifts". We can of course also make the gift of time and skill in

little gifts of craft or hand-prepared food and so on. More on this can be found in the article *Love gifts*.

This all takes time of course, which could add to our stress, though making gifts can be started earlier than Christmas time and it does add more meaning to Christmas.

A note on presents from Santa: Presents left by Santa don't need to be expensive, individual to each child or 'exotic'. A large amount of the joy from Santa's gifts comes from the excitement of waiting, the mystery surrounding their arrival, the process of unwrapping each item and the feeling of having a whole lot of new things, however small, at the end of the present opening. One family gave each child a party hat, a pencil, sharpener, eraser, sticky tape and tiny notebook, a mango, apricot, cherries, and some small chocolates and maybe 2 other items that were more 'exotic' but still small. Big presents may be better coming from parents.

3. Children's stress: Minimising behavioural problems at Christmas

With Christmas being such a stressful time for everyone, children feel it too. Adult stress just compounds the stress on children, who may already be over-excited in anticipation of Santa Claus, presents and sweets. For Christmas to be

a peaceful one parents need to be extra careful to meet their children's needs for good sleep, good food and enough love. Here are some reminders on what might help.

Meet children's basic needs.

Children whose behaviour is becoming difficult before Christmas may be asking for more recognition of their needs. What do they need that is missing? Sleep, food, attention, quiet time at home to potter? At times like these it often

helps to give the child "sacred time": shared time for you and that one child with no interruptions (turn the phone off). Even 15 minutes of this special time helps. Talk together, go for a walk together, do things together.

Avoid over-stimulation of children

Over-stimulation of children in the Christmas season, with too much going on all at once, is a common cause of misbehaviour. Ask yourself about your children's Christmas activities: Are they nourishing for the child or merely entertaining and stimulating? Has there been too much activity with no quiet times for "digestion" of the experiences?

The following strategies can help overwrought children and help to avoid over-stimulation:

- * **Severely limit screen time.** Encourage healthy play and physical activities to give a healthy outlet to excitement and stress.
- * **Severely limit play with noisy toys** or toys which encourage noisy aggressive play. Discourage noisy play where there is yelling or squealing.
- * **Provide silence. Cut down on unnecessary noise,** loud or constant music in the car or at home. Avoid noisy events.
- * **Give children more quiet, unstressed unhurried time.** Give them time to just play and potter quietly at home.
- * **Limit play with children to one playmate at a time.** At stressful times avoid large groups.
- * **Avoid too many outings, over-stimulating situations,** too much car travel and shopping with children.
- * **Go slow.** Plan ahead so that **you** don't have to hurry. Try to be quiet, gentle and peaceful yourself. Speak quietly and more slowly, if your tendency is to talk quickly.
- * **Provide good sleep** and soothe over-excited children at bedtime with a gentle massage of the child's ear or a foot massage with a soothing oil like lavender. Make sure you get enough sleep yourself.
- * **Take time to love your children.** Lie in a hammock for a quiet swing and cuddle. Stop and just be together.

Part 2. Finding Meaning: enriching the Christmas festival

Fewer people feel a close religious connection to Christmas today, but nearly everyone celebrates Christmas. For most people in Australia at least, Christmas has become a secular event for social activities with families and friends and Santa Claus for the children. It has become a commercial opportunity.

Nevertheless, you can make Christmas what *you* want it to be. You can make Christmas a festival about love, care and respect for each other in your family. What you make it is what will nurture your children and what they will remember.

Most Christmas traditions have come from the northern hemisphere where Christmas occurs soon after mid-winter. In the Southern Hemisphere we need to find our own traditions which relate to the summer season, our increased sociability, our bright light and the heat. We can make Christmas a festival of love, but in a different way. The northern hemisphere celebrates the *birth* of the Light. The Southern Hemisphere celebrates the *fullness* of the Light.

To make Christmas more meaningful as a festival of love we need to find our own connection with it. Then we can bring more respectful moments into it where our values are

made clear. We can create an order of events leading up to it, we can create small celebrations within it, we can carry in our hearts more

consciousness of what we want to celebrate here. A good place to start is in the Christmas stories.

1. Giving Christmas more meaning through content

The gifts for the child in the Christmas stories

There are the affirming gifts for children in the many stories of Christmas. Regardless of whether you are a committed Christian or not, you can still tell the story of the birth of the special child in Bethlehem, towards which all the preparations of Advent before Christmas lead. The Christmas nativity story is actually a therapeutic story about love for every child who ever wanted to be welcomed with love into this world; for the Jesus child was welcomed by the love and singing of angels, by the simple shepherds who heard the angels, even great kings who saw the child's own special star and followed it to find him.

Hearing such a story confirms children's sense of being loveable and loved too. It is a story set in tradition in winter and children sometimes sense this and ask for it again in the Southern hemisphere winter. Children from other religions too can be nourished by this nativity story. To this picture for Christians, of course, is also added the great love of God and the new sort of love Christ brought into the world.

The other main stories at Christmas are found in connection with the gift givers to children, with Santa Claus and Father Christmas being the best known in the English speaking world. Other gift givers from European traditions are St Nicholas, Babushka, Befana, the Christengel, the Julenisse and others. The origins of these "Spirits of Giving" make an interesting study and give us inspiration for how to deal with

children's questions about whether these figures are 'real'. These figures usually have their human helpers, whom we may see at parties and shops, or even, as one child observed, "in the back of a ute, checking out the route."

These "Spirits of Giving" put the child in the centre for a day, without staying for even a thank you, (unless adults demand it), although some, so we are told by adults, only come if the children are good. Generally though, it is found that the real "Spirits of Giving" come when the children are absent, or in the night when the children sleep, and ask nothing in return. They too nourish our children's sense of being loved unconditionally.

Are they real? Well, in the sense that the human helpers are themselves "The Spirits of Giving" they are real. Alternatively, Santa Claus can be seen to represent the "Spirit of Giving" while his helpers (the parents) help carry his message. As children get older and begin to ask more questions, it can help to emphasise the importance of Santa's helpers, avoiding a child's feeling of being lied to when they finally learn the 'truth'. By the way, children themselves are very happy to believe the "Spirits of Giving" are real, as long as they get something from them.

There are of course many other beautiful stories which are written about and for Christmas and give it more meaning.

A candle lighting ceremony for a festival of love

A beautiful way to bring meaning to Christmas is to make it into a festival of love. We can celebrate this in a special way if we create a little ceremony in which we light candles for those we love. With a traditional Christmas tree one could do this with the real candles on the tree, but this can also be done with many tea candles placed all around a special Christmas candle. The idea is for each person present at the time to take turns to light a candle for someone they wish to remember with love, until all the candles are lit. You might light candles for an individual person or family or group, someone from your life now or in the past, people nearby or far away, alive or now dead. It gives us a chance to remember them with love: family members, good friends, teachers, helpers, work mates, neighbours and so on.

Plan what you are going to do ahead of time. You might want to go oldest to youngest, or youngest to oldest. Depending on the age of the children, you could pass a taper around to light the candles, or one person could do the lighting. This can be done at just one special time, preferably in the evening, perhaps on Christmas Eve, or it can be repeated at other times in the

Twelve Nights of Christmas so that you can light a candle for many more people. If you have visitors who join you on some nights, they join their circles of love with yours. As a family tradition, this brings a sense of all the circles of love around us, over time. It builds a sense of belonging and of how much loving there is in the world. This is a heart-warming time for children and adults alike.

Part of the specialness of this time is having a quiet time to watch the candle flames, maybe singing or humming a quiet carol meanwhile. Well known gentle carols like *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger* work beautifully. At the end the candles are best snuffed out by a candle snuffer, not blown out. The whole ceremony has more power if it is done with reverence in a different mood than that of everyday living, without talk.

(Reminder: All candles, even tea candles, are safest when placed on small ceramic saucers in case the candles spill hot wax or overheat, increasing the risk of fire. Candles should never be left alight if there is no one in the room old enough to watch them. That needs to be a family safety rule.)

2. Giving Christmas more form

Children are helped when special events have steps which lead up to them, where there is an ordered sense of anticipation. Like counting down the sleeps to a birthday. With Christmas, advertising starts happening even in early November and it can be a long wait for children. Christmas traditions offer some help here.

Consider the following:

Advent Calendar. Let them make an Advent

Calendar in which the children open one little door for each day of December up to Christmas Eve. This leads the child in a visible way, day by day up to Christmas. These calendars can of course be bought, but they are often based on winter images and it can be fun to make one of your own using images suited to your child.

Advent Wreath.

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You might make an Advent wreath, but with greenery and spring flowers placed in a ring of little jars of water, four of which contain the Advent candles (in sand in the jar)—this way you can replace the flowers as they fade in time with the hot weather.

Starting on the first Sunday of Advent (the fourth before Christmas Day) you would light one candle, in the second week two candles, in the third week three candles and finally on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, the fourth candle. You could also add a large candle in the centre on Christmas Eve—when this is lit Christmas is here.

Here is an opportunity to bring a summer feeling into our southern hemisphere/Australian Christmas, so important for young children who live so closely connected to their environment.

The 12 Days of Christmas. Consider also using

3. *Giving Christmas more special moments.*

Children are nourished by special quiet moments, where awe and reverence can find a place. These special moments, out of the ordinary ways of life, out of the noise and bustle of the everyday, are the times that we often remember in later years. They are created with mindfulness, using reverence, candles, music, nature, stories and more.

If you decide to celebrate Christmas over a longer time, through Advent, through the Twelve days of Christmas, you will be able to create more of these special quiet moments. They do not have to very long, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, longer if a story is told. Perhaps on each Sunday of Advent. On Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning, although the excitement of Christmas stockings can eclipse everything else, but perhaps at breakfast. On Christmas night before bed. On each or some of the Twelve

the 12 days of Christmas (starting with Christmas Eve when the shepherds come, and ending on the night of the 5th January, when the kings can come) to take the pressure off Christmas Day and the 'let down' feeling after it when everything occurs on the one day. Using Christmas Eve, as many European countries do, to have a quiet family time for a story and singing around the Christmas tree, also gives time for quiet family celebration. This then leaves Christmas Day for the socialising with extended family. Be creative with the Christmas period! Create your own family traditions.

There is also the wonderful possibility of celebrating Three Kings Day with a special French Three Kings cake at the end of the 12 days on the evening of January 5th. (The 12 days of Christmas starts on Christmas Eve.)

Days.

Use reverence. Whisper more. Insist that the children are quiet and respectful in these special moments (or the magic is frightened away!)

Use candles. Candle flame takes us into a special place. At the end of these little celebrations, snuff the candles where you can—blowing also blows the magic away—and all quietly watch the 'wishing smoke'.

Meal blessings. You might consider starting the meal with a candle being lit and a special meal blessing for Christmas. Linking hands to bless the meal can bring a moment of quietness and centredness even into chaos! Even babies love this.

Use singing. Here is one festival that most people already know songs for—Christmas

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carols. *Away in a manger* and *Silent Night* and other gentle carols can be sung with great tenderness for story times. Singing and humming are quietening and can be used for candle lighting and times of candle flame watching. Music can 'hold' the children for longer in a quiet place. Quiet music played on an instrument by a person who can be sensitive to the mood of the children can be beautiful too.

Use nature. Take them into the garden and help them to find the flowers and seeds which are also preparing to celebrate the Christmas child's birthday by giving us their little stars and suns and bells, so often found in summer flowers,

gum nuts, and seed pods forming from the spring flowers. You have only to help them have a close look. Arrange them on your festival table.

Use stories. You might consider a special Christmas story shared as a family, told at the end of the day, or through Advent. Children love to hear stories about their parent's childhood Christmases, or about how children in other lands celebrate Christmas. *Mary's Little Donkey* by Gunhild Sehlin (Floris Books) is a beautiful longer book to read in this way (omit the scary bits for small children). Tell them the story with candles and a gentle song.

All of these things — more care for ourselves and our children's needs, more meaning, more form, more special times in our Christmas — create moments to be remembered. So take a deep breath, take some personal space, make some beautiful family time and nourish yourself with a peaceful, joy filled Christmas!

Other articles of interest on the website

Extra advice on creating a small family celebration can be found in *Creating family celebrations and festivals*.

Ideas for presents can be found in *Love gifts* and in *Grandma's and Grandpa's Perfectly Possible Present List* which contains suggestions for children's presents which encourage healthy play and activities.