

Lowenstein & Associates

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Teaching Your Kids About the Real Meaning of the Holidays

By David Lowenstein, Ph.D.

Most Americans agree that the holidays have become too commercial and too hectic. We rush around, trying to make sure everything is accomplished. We get sucked into the gift buying trap, what we do never seems to please everyone or be quite enough and too often, the joy of the season gets lost in the process.

One day you may look around and realize that the true meaning of the holidays has been missed. You're missing it and more importantly, your kids are missing it. But no matter how old your children are, it's never too late to develop new traditions and find ways emphasize what the holidays are all about to your family.

Set an Example

It's up to you as a parent to instill the importance of the holidays in your own family. Whether you place emphasis on the religious significance of the holiday, spending time together or giving to charity, your children take cues from you. If they see you running around in a frenzy and missing out on the joy of the season, they will note the significance of this. Conversely, if you slow down and spend time enjoying this time of year, this will send a strong message to your kids about what's important.

Promote Family Togetherness

Spending time together as a family is an important way to celebrate. One way to do this is get your kids involved in the holiday preparation process - have them wrap presents, clean the house for guests, bake cookies, or plan activities. This helps establish an important role for them in the family holiday preparations for years to come. Create new family traditions that don't focus on gift giving like special outings or making holiday cards together for nursing home residents.

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Perform Acts of Charity

Engaging in charitable activities is one of the most powerful things you can do to remind your children of the purpose of celebrating the holidays. Serve meals together at a local soup kitchen or shelter. Collect toys for a toy drive. "Adopt" a needy family and buy food and gifts for them. Ask your children to donate old toys they no longer use to a local organization. Whatever you do together to help others, no matter how big or small, is certain to bring joy to both you and your children.

Learn About Different Religions and Cultures

America is a melting pot of religions, cultures and traditions, so learn about how others celebrate the holidays. What do various traditions mean, what is the history, how do they celebrate? There are many terrific children's books that explain the history and significance of different holidays. Learn about these customs with your children and discuss how they are similar to yours and how they are different. Remind them that every holiday celebrates gratitude, good will and peace, no matter what culture.

Encourage Giving

This year, ask your children to make up a list of gifts they are planning to give to *others*. You can help them finance the gifts, but they don't have to be things that cost money - a handmade card, a plate of cookies or a helping hand to a neighbor. This reinforces the idea of giving during this season, not just receiving.

Manage Gift Expectations

If you want to scale back on gift-giving and emphasize other aspects of the holidays, let your family know ahead of time so you can set expectations. Sit them down and explain that you'd like the holidays to be a bit different this year and why. Let them know how excited you are to be making changes and invite them to help you find other ways to celebrate. If they know what to expect, they will accept and even embrace your new way of doing things.

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What About Santa?

Santa Claus is an icon of goodness. If you celebrate Christmas, make sure to emphasize this so the gift-giving aspect of Santa doesn't completely overshadow what's really magical. Remind your kids that Santa wants them to be good all year so they will feel the spirit of Christmas all year round. And if your kids are just finding out that Santa Claus isn't (gasp!) real, this can actually reinforce to these older children what the holidays are truly about - giving, caring, and togetherness.

If you find yourself feeling let down after the holidays, wondering what exactly was missing, it's time to reevaluate. Too often, the anxiety of the holidays far outshines the true reasons why we celebrate them. This year, consider what the holidays mean to you and what you want them to mean to your children and emphasize these things during the season and for the entire year. You'll be happy to find that your family agrees that religion, charity, good will, family togetherness and love for each other creates more lasting memories than elaborate feasts, expensive decorations and breakable toys.

Dr. David Lowenstein is a Psychologist with over twenty-five years of clinical experience in his private practice in Columbus, OH. He specializes in individual, group and family therapy with children and adolescents. Dr. Lowenstein conducts workshops for Parent-Teacher organizations nationwide on a variety of relevant topics. Contact him at davidlowenstein@rroho.com.

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