



Institute of
Child Psychology

5 Ways to Make Christmas Meaningful for Every Child



This Christmas is simply different than past years—there is no denying that.

Many families are struggling to make ends meet and family gatherings will be limited or not possible. We have spoken to many families who are worried that the pandemic will ruin Christmas for their children. We don't want to invalidate the collective grief that we are going through—it's not an easy Christmas for many, and we need to make space for those feelings. This all being said, we think that many of us are missing this remarkable opportunity to re-focus and examine our family values regarding this holiday season.

Our children's values and beliefs are imparted by their caregivers; if all we focus on is the receiving of gifts, we miss out on the opportunity *for connection, giving, and gratitude* that can become (and I think should be) a central part of the holiday season.

If your family celebrates Christmas, there is no denying that children love receiving gifts from family or that Santa is a magical part of the holiday, but when I asked my children last night what their favourite part of the holidays was (other than gifts;) they responded with: *'snuggling up and watching movies . . . decorating the tree . . . baking cookies. . . reading Christmas books . . . making Christmas crafts. . . you and dad not working.'*

1. Give Your Child the Gift of Your Undivided Attention

"You will always be your child's favorite toy." -- Vicki Lansky

Our children want our time—*our undivided* attention and connection*. Physical presents are alluring, as they give our children a surge of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that essentially motivates us and makes us feel good for short periods of time; however, it's only temporary. We need more than that. We're social creatures who are designed to rest in the connection of our family (both biological and otherwise). We need more than the pursuit of *'things.'* Long-term happiness comes from ***connection, meaning, and purpose***, not from things. When your child feels valued, seen, heard, and accepted for who they are, you are giving them the greatest gift of all.

2. Cultivate Holiday Rituals that Foster Connection

Like my children stated, it was the traditions our family had cultivated that was a highlight of their holidays. What special things can you do with your children that brings out the magic of love and connection? Here are just a few ideas:

- *Bake and decorate Christmas cookies*
- *Go for a walk in your neighborhood to look at the lights*
- *Play Christmas music and have a dance party in the kitchen*
- *Snuggle up with hot chocolate and watch movies in your pajamas*
- *Make homemade cards for family or friends*
- *Write handmade letters for Santa*
- *Make homemade ornaments*
- *Decorate gingerbread houses*
- *Wear matching PJ sets*
- *Create new holiday meals or Christmas themed snacks*
- *Make homemade ugly Christmas sweaters*
- *Write each family member a letter or card to tell them what makes them special and what you're grateful for*
- *Read Christmas books together*
- *Let your children stay up late for a family game night*
- *Countdown to Christmas with paper chain links*
- *Go ice-skating*

3. Point Your Child's Attention Giving.

So many individuals and families are in need during the holidays, and many do not have enough. Santa is really a *symbol of giving*, perhaps you could have a conversation with your children about how we can all be like Santa and make someone's Christmas special. We may need to be extra creative this year, but there is always a way to reach out and connect. Some ideas include:

- *Help a family who has been really impacted by 2020*
- *Donate food to your local food bank*
- *Donate toys to organizations who gift children whose families cannot afford presents*
- *Bake cookies or crafts for seniors who are alone on the holidays*
- *Surprise a neighbor with homemade cookies or Christmas cards*

4. This is the Year to be Grateful for Everything we Have, not Receive Everything we Want

Gratitude is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children and ourselves. Gratitude literally* changes your brain for the better. It sheds toxic emotions such as resentment and envy, creates greater neural sensitivity in the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain area associated with learning and decision making, and increases feelings of happiness and optimism.

Ideas for cultivating gratitude:

- *Talk about what you're grateful for before you eat a meal together and before bed*
- *Start a gratitude journal with your child/children*
- *Start a gratitude jar (your children write down something they're grateful for each night of the week and then pop it into the jar). It is really fun to pick a night as a family to read through all of the gratitude thoughts.*

5. Be Aware of How Other Families are Struggling—be Mindful of the Elaborate “Santa Gifts”

This is an important one for us as a child psychologists who work with children in the foster care system. If Santa "visits your child" please do not have your child's Santa gift be something elaborate and expensive (i.e., electronics). When your child goes back to school and shares with their class what gifts Santa brought, how do you think it makes a child feel whose family or foster family cannot afford a cell phone or an Xbox? A close friend of mine put it this way: *if an elf can't make it, it's not from Santa--- the North Pole doesn't have that kind of technology;*)