

Is it a tradition or a party?

Christmas lights are being draped over the trees in your local mall. It's the middle of October and we finally have cool enough weather to put out the pumpkins and tie up the cornhusks.

Somewhere, lurking in the windows of the supermarkets are ads for turkeys and pumpkin pie spices. The whole scene makes us breathless with panic and frustration with no hint of joyous anticipation.

How do we bring the holidays to our young children in an appropriate and timely manner? How do we create treasured family traditions and reflect our beliefs and values in the face of all of this?

The first question is perhaps "Who's in charge?" This debate is all too familiar and public. Holiday celebrations have for many years been the fodder for fall and winter curriculum in our public schools. In our more enlightened times this practice is rightfully questioned. Is the public school classroom the place to weave a national belief system? Separation of religious activity and civic activity is the founding principle of our country. We are well grounded in our protests that the schools should not dictate holidays with a particular religious meaning.

And then we have the public arena of the media and the merchants. One size does NOT fit all when it comes to traditions and celebrations. All of us are subject to the inundation of commercials for what "they" think we want, need and even believe. Young children are clearly influenced by this environmental assault. TV screams "Buy, Buy, Buy!". Every shop and street stimulates and over stimulates the senses with tempting offers. The fury that builds as we start the seasons earlier and earlier creates a stressed parent and an anxious child.

The answer must, and can be, that you - the parents - are in charge. How, how much and when is in your hands. Holidays are personal days with traditions that come from the generations. Traditions are interpreted and re-created with each generation. Parents bring the experiences and beliefs with them to their children. Together they can accept, reject and rearrange the celebration.

Young children learn best when their interests are observed and supported. They are engaged and invested in the real events in their lives. Building traditions is an exciting opportunity to tap into the imagination and feelings of your child. Cooking and preparing for the feasts that surround most holidays is a perfect way to bring a child into

the "making meaning" process. Favorite recipes can be followed or reinvented. Memories shared as you roll the dough or spice the food will remain a part of the essence of that holiday for any child. Smells, tastes and sounds carry the memories of past celebrations and imprint the traditions in their minds. Stories that get told and retold around the table about family adventures or misadventures provide the frame for young children to understanding the history and values of the adults in their lives.

Infants may not be able to contribute hands to the party, yet they are absorbing the sensory experiences and should be included. Toddlers are becoming independent beings and can be allowed to help with preparations and especially clean up. What toddler doesn't love to do the dishes over and over again? Preschoolers are able to repeat and represent the stories around the preparations. This is a critical age to expose children to the diverse ways that extended families and friends celebrate. Tolerance and understanding of others is reinforced by this exploration. And finally young school-age children will be prepared to bring who they are to the widening circle of friends and community connections. If they have been able to build their own skills, children will be secure in their understanding of the meaning of a holiday. They can resist the pressures to consume and conform and appreciate the joyful heart of the event.

We must remember that we have the ability to turn off the holiday frenzy and should do so whenever possible. Many holidays this time of year celebrate family and community and keeping both emotionally healthy. Commercialism does not have to be a part of these celebrations. Our children and our cherished beliefs depend on us to make the traditions real and authentic. There is still time to give meaning to the celebration and not simply come to the party.

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensuring that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; business public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family.

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