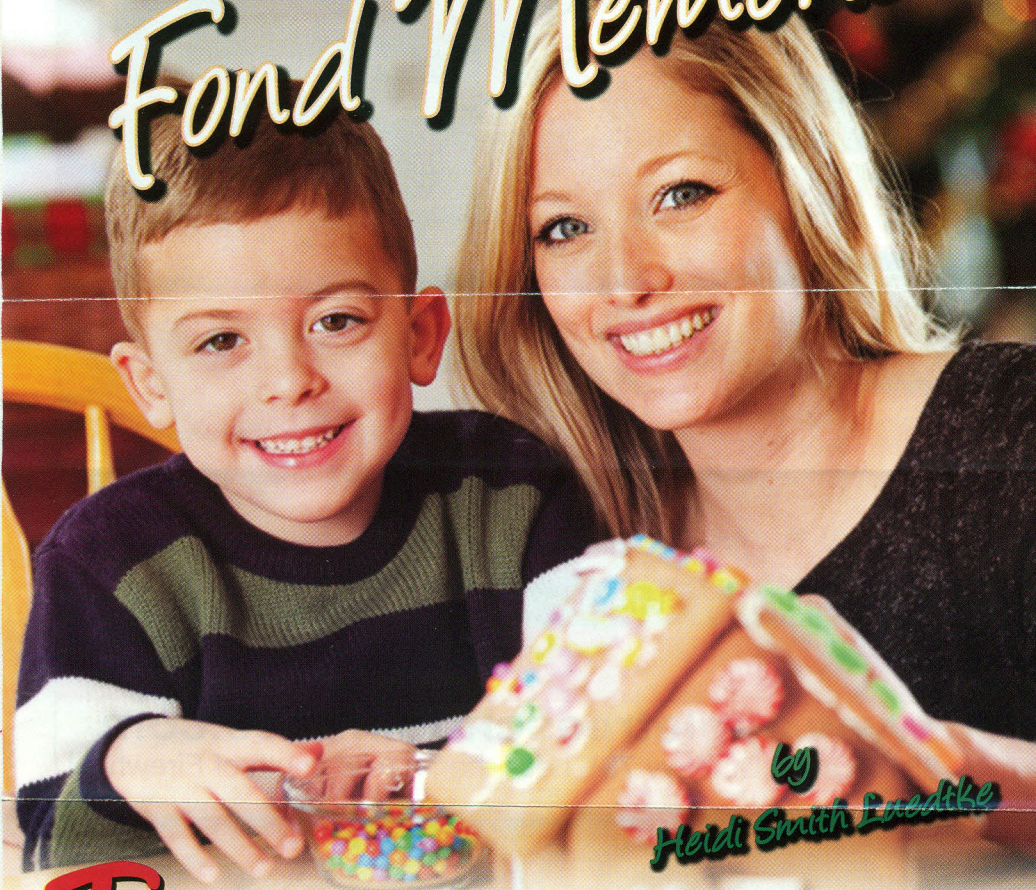


The Gift of Fond Memories



by
Heidi Smith Evedtke

I f change seems to be the only constant at your house, you may long for the comfort and connectedness that family traditions instill. Even if you don't have the secret recipe for Grandma's snickerdoodles, you've got what it takes to make meaningful memories for your kids this season.

"In these fast-paced times, many of us hunger for simple, meaningful traditions we can pass on to our children," says Nava Atlas, author of *Everyday Traditions: Simple Family Rituals for Connection and Comfort* (2005, Amberwood Press). And family rituals need not be elaborate, Atlas contends. Simpler may be better. That's good news for parents too busy or too broke to host an extravagant party or take the kids on a tropical holiday vacation this year.

Making fond memories requires nothing more than embellishing daily routines in ways that reflect our values and passions, explains Atlas. You can pass on your appreciation for nature, passion for fitness, or love of philanthropy by incorporating them into family events. Meals, baths, story time, and bed time are all great opportunities to build meaningful rituals into daily life whereas holidays and changing seasons may inspire annual traditions.

Go from ordinary mom to memory-maker extraordinaire when you combine these not-so-secret ingredients to create a your own family traditions.

Anticipation. Feel happy even before the fun begins. Let kids count down with big, bold Xs on the calendar or by making a paper chain and removing one link each day. Didn't plan that far ahead? Count down the hours to tonight's "picnic dinner under the stars" by singing Twinkle, Twinkle every hour on the hour and announcing "six hours to go" and so on. Your enthusiasm will get kids excited about what's to come. Bonus: They'll remember the fun they had every time they hear Twinkle, Twinkle.

Consistency. You know kids love repetition because they've asked you to read the same bedtime story every night for three weeks. And new isn't necessarily better when it comes to making memories. "The repetitive, cyclical, and predictable nature of rituals is what makes them comforting and reassuring," Atlas says. Why not hang some old decorations, even if they aren't looking so elegant any more. Your kids will fight over those tacky baubles when they have families of their own some day.

Specialness. Even everyday activities are memory makers when you add a twist. Light candles on the dinner table or don glow-stick

necklaces to light up the longest night of the year (this year's Winter Solstice is December 21st). Add vanilla extract and colored sugar sprinkles to kids' milk and call it "holiday cheer." Serve throughout the holiday season or whenever kids' spirits could use a boost. Traditions don't have to be expensive or time-consuming to be memorable.

Vividness. Smells, sounds, and images can bring back feelings with amazing force. Repeat "I Think I Can, I Think I Can" as you all chug up the hill carrying sleds or riding bikes. Wear red foam noses while you watch Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer together (buy noses at a costume or party supply shop or order online at www.orientaltrading.com). Fill the tub with bubbles and have an Abominable Snowman casting call. Sensory elements heighten our experiences and help create a slowed-down, in-the-moment feeling, says Atlas.

Positivity. If – or should I say when – things don't go as planned, take twists and turns in stride and keep your tone fun and lighthearted. A present without a gift tag is not a disaster, it's "the mystery gift." Pass it around and ask each member of the family to shake and jiggle it before guessing what it is and for whom. Let the littlest family member open it and carry it to the intended recipient. Some of the best family traditions come about by accident.

Participation. Get everyone involved in a way that uses their skills and talents. Little kids might stir cookie dough or decorate paper gift bags for their cousins' gifts. Bigger kids might act out a favorite song or story or make home-made cards to send. You'll certainly want to capture events on camera, but don't get lost behind the lens. You could use a little glitter-gluing therapy, too.

Being. Make holiday happenings special by being there completely – in mind, body, and spirit. Leave your paperwork at the office and turn off your cell phone in honor of the mid-winter snow-shoveling contest in the front yard. Notice how your kids light up (or groan, "Oh, mom...") when you cheer them on a little too loudly. Let dishes pile up in the sink while you the kids trounce you in an after-dinner Wii bowling tournament. Your undivided attention is the most powerful memory-maker of all.

Reflection. Savor holiday traditions by thinking about what they mean to you and sharing your thoughts with those you love. Intentional reflection helps us to learn from and remember our experiences. Plus, it will warm your heart to know what your kids loved most about volunteering at the food bank was stacking the cans in rows (your 3-year-old engineer) or singing Jingle Bells while they loaded boxes into recipients' cars (your 7-year-old would-be diva).

Meaningful family traditions build a sense of shared identity and security that comforts kids and grown-ups alike when the busy-ness and stress of modern life are overwhelming, Atlas explains. Best of all, the fond memories you make will never be lost, wear out, or go out of style. You can't say that about most other gifts you'll give this season, can you?