Simple Pleasures to Bring You Closer as a Family Over the Holidays

The winter holiday season is a time when simple pleasures often mean the most. Sitting by a warm fire with cousins on a cold night. Opening a homemade gift from a child. Savoring the aroma of a delicious holiday bread baking in the oven. Reading a heartfelt, handwritten message from someone you love. Gathering several generations of your family together to sing a holiday song that has special meaning for all of you. These and other simple pleasures can bring you close as a family.

Identifying the things that give your life meaning

Enjoying simple pleasures begins with knowing your values, or what's most important to you and your family. Everyone in your household may have a different idea about this, so it's worth taking time to sit down together and talk about the things that you find most worthwhile during the holiday season. Here are some ways to get started:

Ask everyone in your household, both children and adults, to write down the holiday traditions that are most important to them. You might ask everyone to focus on traditions that are priceless but that don't cost much money; for example, "Going to Uncle David's for singing." Take some time to discuss why each tradition is important and what values they express. For example, singing at Uncle David's may be meaningful because you value family ties, it helps you feel connected, it's a way to show your love for one another, and you like to have fun together.

As you explore simple ways to celebrate the holidays, get as many ideas as you can from your family. They'll be more likely to enjoy the simple traditions you come up with together if everyone is involved in the conversation.

Explore meaningful traditions as a group. Talk about ways to make simple traditions the focus of your holidays. What is your top priority as a family? Is it honoring the traditions of your faith? Celebrating in a way that respects the environment? Making a place for rituals important to your cultural group?

Talk about how you can grow close through simple pleasures. Children may not understand the benefits of enjoying relaxing activities, so you may want to give them a simple explanation like, "It feels good when our family does things together, like baking cookies or reading a special story. It reminds of us of how much we love each other."

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Things to do together

The holiday season abounds with simple pleasures that everyone in your family can enjoy. Most communities offer festive activities that cost little or nothing, and you can find others in the beauty of the natural world -- the winter sky, the evergreens in a local park, the first frost on a windowpane.

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Take a winter nature walk in your neighborhood. Notice which animals are out and about, which ponds have frozen over, and how many different types of evergreen trees you can spot. The National Audubon Society has chapters in many states and has ideas on outdoor activities to do together as a family.

Go stargazing. Make the most of a crisp, clear winter night by looking at constellations, the patterns of stars in the sky. Visit the Space.com website to learn what's out there. Search online for "winter constellations." If you have a smartphone, try one of the many apps that help you find constellations and planets in the night sky, such as SkyGuide, Sky Map, Star Walk, and Planets.

Organize a winter sports outing. Depending on the weather, you might go sledding, ice-skating, or hiking along a trail in a community park.

Bake a holiday bread. Make it a family project, with one person choosing the recipe, another shopping for ingredients, and everyone chopping fruit or nuts together. Make an extra loaf to take to an older neighbor or family that could use extra cheer this year.

Invite relatives to join you for a potluck holiday brunch or buffet instead of a formal sit-down meal. Serve punch; hot mulled cider; or coffee, tea, and hot chocolate instead of more expensive drinks. Just remember that if you've had relatives over for a sit-down meal in the past, they may expect this again. It's thoughtful to let them know well in advance that you plan to do things differently this year.

Sing songs of the season. Invite relatives and friends to join you in a holiday sing-along and to bring any instruments that they play. Search online for free or low-cost holiday song apps for your computer or smartphone if you need the words, music, or ideas on what to sing. Or take part as a family in a similar event at a house of worship or community center.

Share holiday memories in a cozy setting. Gather around a fireplace. Linger over a candlelit holiday meal. Pile into a big bed in your pajamas or bathrobes on a holiday morning. The warm setting will help to inspire warm memories that everybody can enjoy.

Read a holiday story together. Ask a children's librarian for suggestions that might interest your child or teenager. Or try a picture book like Chris Van Allsburg's The Polar Express (Houghton Mifflin, 2009), Eric A. Kimmel's Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins (Holiday House, 1994), or Karen Katz's My First Ramadan (Holt, 2007) or My First Chinese New Year (Holt, 2012). You can download many classic holiday stories for free at Project Gutenberg or other sites.

Go to a free holiday concert, recital, or pageant. Check the calendar of events in your local newspaper or on its website to learn about the options. Talk with your family about these and try the one that sounds most interesting to all of you.

Take part in a toy, food, or clothing drive. During the holidays, many communities have drives to collect toys, food, or warm clothes for families that need them. Call the mayor's office to find out which organizations sponsor these collection drives in your area. Search the internet for "food drive" or "food bank" and your city or region. Or get in touch with the nearest office of the United Way, which you can find through its website.

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Call an animal shelter and find out what pets need at holiday times. If you or your children love animals, your family might like to help abandoned pets at holiday times. Call a local shelter and find out if you could volunteer for a few hours or if the shelter would appreciate gifts of food, chew toys, or similar items.

Reach out to help others. Ask each family member to research a charity or an aid organization of their choice, dedicated to helping others, and then present their idea at a family dinner or meeting. Listen to each other's ideas, and vote to decide on which philanthropy to help and the amount of your donation.

Things to make on a shoestring

Many of the best holiday gifts are homemade presents that cost little or nothing. You might make:

Coupons good for time with you. Children may beg for expensive gifts, but what many really want is time with you. Consider giving your child coupons for "A visit to the park on a Saturday morning," "A trip to the store for an ice cream cone in your favorite flavor," or "An hour of doing anything you want with me."

Instead of using expensive store-bought paper, consider wrapping gifts in items you have on hand, such as unused wallpaper or shelf paper or brown paper that you've hand-decorated or tied with yarn or ribbon. Or wrap a gift for a child in the comics from the Sunday newspaper and for a sports fan from the sports section. This is also a good way to recycle old papers and "go green" over the holidays, or show your respect for the environment as you celebrate.

Gift certificates good for a service from you. You might give siblings or cousins gift certificates for babysitting, dog sitting, or help with a project such as painting a room, cleaning out a basement, or getting started with a software program or app such as Skype, FaceTime, or Tango that will let you have video chats. Your spouse or partner might appreciate a certificate for a backrub, foot massage, or breakfast in bed.

A family recipe book. Ask each of your close relatives for one or two favorite recipes, then copy them and make a family cookbook. You might put the recipes in inexpensive three-ring binders, or send an electronic version. Be sure to include one of your own recipes.

A batch of your famous chili, taco or spaghetti sauce, or soup that the recipient can freeze. If you need to give gifts to several relatives, make a large batch and divide it up. A great homemade bread, salad dressing, or jar of preserves can also make a wonderful gift.

Cuttings from plants. Cuttings from many houseplants or garden plants will grow into new plants your relatives can enjoy all year. Search online for how to make cuttings from the type of plants you have, or ask a florist or garden shop.

An audio or a video recording of bedtime stories or songs for a child. Depending on the technology available to you and the child who will receive the gift, you might record stories or songs on a smartphone app or burn them onto a CD or DVD. Or post a story or song on YouTube, where you can adjust the privacy settings to permit only those you invite to view the video.

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A craft project that takes advantage of one of your special skills. Think about what you do better than all or most of the people in your family. Do you sew, knit, or crochet? Do you do woodwork or scrapbooking? Make a small but unique gift that uses that skill, such as a special box if you love to work with wood.

A copy of an heirloom photograph. Do you have a few cherished photographs that relatives don't? Make copies to give as gifts. You can find inexpensive frames at most discount stores as well as at yard and tag sales.

A handwritten note describing what you most love, admire, or appreciate about the person. You might tuck the note into a gift card, leave it on a pillow, or put it in a box and wrap it up by itself. No matter how you package it, your note might be the best gift your family member has received all year.

With a little creativity, you can also wrap gifts for little or no cost. Instead of using expensive store-bought paper, consider wrapping gifts in items you have on hand, such as unused wallpaper or shelf paper or brown paper that you've hand-decorated or tied with yarn or ribbon. Or wrap a gift for a child in the comics from the Sunday newspaper and for a sports fan from the sports section. This is also a good way to recycle old papers and "go green" over the holidays, or show your respect for the environment as you celebrate.

By enjoying simple pleasures, you'll being sending the message that what's most important at holiday times is being together as a family -- not spending money on costly activities or gifts. This will bring you closer as a family and remind you that, whether your budget is large or small, you will always have many wonderful ways to enjoy each other's company during the holidays.

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