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## Holidays with Family

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VOL. 8 ISSUE 2  
NOV.-DEC. 2015 \$3.95



# Holidays with Family

## 5 Ways to Make it Merry!

BY KATE POCOCK

Teens make for challenging holidays. They don't wake up when you want them to, can be very particular about their food choices—19-ingredient Vegan Tofu Mock Turkey, anyone?—and at times can be barely polite with relatives. And their holiday wish lists get more expensive every year. Yet, with a little bit of planning, this holiday season could be one to remember—for peace and joy, rather than “Madness at the Mall!” Here's how to have a fun, festive time with teenagers in the house.

PHOTO BY BETH SEGAL







## 1. Planning Makes Perfect (Almost)

Teens want to be respected, and they can sometimes actually have good ideas. Well ahead of the season, sit down and ask for their thoughts on activities, presents, food, and outings they might enjoy. Then mark these special days on the calendar for all to see. “Asking your teens gives them a sense of their importance, and shows them that parents value their contributions,” says clinical psychologist Dr. Robin Alter, author of *Anxiety and the Gift of Imagination: A New Model for Helping Parents and Children Manage Anxiety*.

Parents might even share budget considerations and discuss how much money can be spent. Perhaps they would prefer a gift of Time (with a capital ‘T,’ no distractions) with parents or grandparents instead of presents? This is also a good time, too, to talk about expectations. Teens certainly don’t have to spend whole evenings playing card games with the aunts, but they might be expected to help with holiday dinners, perhaps even contribute a recipe or dish of their choosing. “I did this with my own teenage stepdaughter,” says Alter. “She came up with the menus, and she was much more interested in eating the food.”



## 2. Traditions, Traditions

As Tevye sang in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, traditions come from the Mama and the Papa. But that doesn’t mean you have to stick with the tried and true. Perhaps it’s time for some new ones (see sidebar) that acknowledge a teen’s individuality and interests. When family therapist Sharon Earle-Meadows’ kids became teens, Earle-Meadows started an annual Christmas Eve family fondue party. Each teen created a sauce. The whole family would light candles, sit on the floor by the fireplace, and dip treats into the bubbling oil.

“You have to let go of the notions of that storybook holiday and celebrate in a way that keeps teens engaged and acknowledges their individuality,” says Earle-Meadows, who counsels many parents at this time of year. “With teens you have to think about traditions as being building blocks for the future.” Her “teens” are grown up with kids of their own now, and they still look forward to their annual fondue feast by the fire.

### 3. The Friends Factor

For most teens, being connected to friends is vastly important. “It’s what gets them out of bed in the mornings and gets them off to school,” says Alter. At the same time, parents should specify in clear terms what days teens need to be available, and specify days that are open for friends or other activities. “Know that there will be conflicts in terms of time. Something will come up, they really need to go to this party,” adds Alter. “So it’s important to be firm and flexible at the same time.”

It’s also important to set limits on cell phones and gadgets. “You can’t take them away,” concludes Alter. “It’s like taking away a limb. But perhaps during special family dinners, they are ‘out of the room, out of sight, and out of mind.’ Parents’ phones too!”



### 4. Attitude

Remind teens that the holiday season is not only about getting but also giving. Single mom Tracy Ford wanted her daughter, Lauren, to know and care about those less fortunate. So each year, during her daughter’s teen years, they would shop with her babysitting money to buy a present for a girl the same age, and donate it through the Salvation Army. “It could be a book she had loved, a jigsaw puzzle, or pretty earrings,” says Ford. “And I believe this contributed to her very generous personality today.”

The Perrin-Michel family started a new tradition last year with 11-year-old Alex and 15-year-old Sophia. “We decided now that they were older, it was time to give back,” says mom Deneen. So they spent Christmas morning baking cookies, wrapping them in cellophane, and adding a pair of warm socks to the gift. After church service, the whole family walked through the city’s mission district, distributing the packages to homeless citizens and shelter residents who were out and about.

“It was a good lesson too,” says their mom. “My older daughter asked many questions such as, ‘What did these people do to deserve this situation? How did they end up here?’ We had some excellent discussions.” The family is planning to do it again.

“It really made our Christmas,” says Deneen. “This new tradition was so much better than the kids sitting on their iPads all morning.”

## Holiday Fight?

### How to Hit Reset

Sometimes the holidays are the perfect storm. Travel, stress, the pressure to have a “perfect” holiday, and all that family togetherness can lead to fights with your teenager. After a fight, how can you reboot your holiday?

“Everyone wants their holidays together to be perfect, and not to ruin your family time together,” says Dr. Kristen Wynns, a psychologist with Wynns Family Psychology in Raleigh, North Carolina.

While parents may not want to spoil dinner at Grandma’s house by making a scene, it’s not a good idea to simply sweep bad behavior under the rug.

After a fight, have a “cooling off” period where the parent and teen take some time apart, in separate rooms if possible, Wynns advises. “You both will be more productive and less emotional when those physiological responses to a fight have dissipated.”

“I usually recommend more immediate consequences for unacceptable behavior,” notes Wynns, “but it’s okay for parents to consider whether that would disrupt the flow of the family’s enjoyment of their holiday.”

You might pre-empt some fights by talking together as a family before the holiday begins. Revisit your family’s ground rules and expectations. “Decide which small things you’re going to overlook with the goal of everyone getting along, but also your non-negotiables that are unacceptable,” explains Wynns.

—Jane Parent





# Teen-Pleasing Traditions

**T**raditions are important because they “re-affirm the personal connections that we have and protect us from the terrible, difficult life circumstances that we may encounter,” says Dr. James Wellborn, psychologist and author of *Raising Teens in the 21st Century*. “So it’s really worth thinking about the kind of traditions that you want to create for your family.”

Here are some tested traditions that you might want to add to your holiday celebrations:

## 1. Crafty thinking:

“I bought wool and knitting needles for our annual Chanukah celebration,” says one mom. “Grandmas were casting on stitches for grandkids. It was quite wonderful. And my nieces started a knitting group as a result of that evening.”

## 2. Change the menu:

One family decided to spend less time in the kitchen by canceling their annual turkey and making hamburgers with toppings instead. On Christmas Day, when teens had time and inclination, they helped to plan, cook, and serve dinner.

## 3. Puzzling fun:

Every year, my family’s grandma would break open a 1,000- to 2,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. As grandkids helped to navigate the pieces into place, they would talk and discuss the past year and what was

on tap for the next. (Even after grandma passed away, the grown-up grandkids each chose a puzzle that would call up memories of these special times.)

## 4. Widening the circle:

Open up family time to friends and outsiders, especially those who don’t celebrate your particular holiday. Our own family loved to invite our teens’ friends who were Jewish or Muslim to share Christmas traditions. Guests enjoyed stirring wishes into the pudding batter, decorating place cards for the table, and playing board games. As Dr. Alter says, “Everyone is a little bit happier, and on a little bit better behavior. And it’s a nice way of sharing family pride.”

## 5. Getting creative:

One family exchanges traditionally funny gifts with each other, each one decorated with a hand-written poem. “It’s a whole evening,” says their mom. “We eat, we drink, we laugh and have so much fun.” The verse is supposed to give a clue to the inexpensive gift inside. One example: a beeping key locator for a teen who is constantly misplacing his keys with a humorous poem about the habit to match. “It’s great for teens who don’t have a lot of money because it’s not how much they spend,” adds the mom, “but rather the thought behind the gift and how clever the poem is.”

—Kate Pocock



## 5. Gratitude

In the end, the holiday season is about celebrating with those we love, and saying thanks for what we have. But how can you foster gratitude during those teen years? “It’s easy to lose sight during the holidays, especially with all the running around, the planning, and the getting of everything,” says Dr. James G. Wellborn, a clinical psychologist and author of *Raising Teens in the 21st Century: A Practical Guide to Effective Parenting*.

One of the best ways to teach gratitude is to model gratitude. “Look for opportunities when your teen is wandering around, or when you are driving with them in the car,” says Wellborn. “Then act as if you suddenly thought of something positive and mention it out loud. You might say something like, ‘I’m really amazed at what we have and how great our life is these days.’” And if your teen does something around the house—even something you’ve asked them to do—acknowledge that by saying, “Thank you, I really appreciate that.”

Wellborn is also an aficionado of that old chestnut, the thank you note. “This habit requires your teenager to go through the process of identifying and appreciating what is worthy of acknowledgement,” he says. Another family activity in the same vein: ask your family to write a list of five non-material things each of you appreciates — a person, experience, or even a place — then share them out loud. It turns out that being grateful gives back to parents — and teenagers — too. “Teens who practice gratitude have a more positive attitude toward school—and their parents,” says Wellborn. “And they offer more help and emotional support to others more often.” And that’s a holiday gift for everyone involved in the celebrations.