

Give Presence this Holiday Season

by Maryellen P. Mullin, LMFT

In modern life, it is hard to stay mindful of what matters during the holiday season, let alone teach it to children. Parents express concern with consumerism, setting and managing realistic expectations about gift buying and teaching gratefulness. Reflection, attention spans and thank you notes dwindle these days. Parents are overwhelmed by unrealistic demands, experiencing daily defeats. To turn it around and get a grip, it will take a bit of planning and focus. If you invest some time to slow down and be present, the return will be worth it for your sanity and family life.

Take time to observe. At home: Put the device away, and if you allow screen time, sit down to watch a show with your child/adolescent. Observe the show and advertisements. What is the product, message or value promoted? Pay attention to how to you feel engaging in this experience.

At the store: What do you see? What products are placed at a child's eye level? Are products colorful, fun, enticing, etc.? Notice your feelings. How would your child/adolescent feel eyeing the visual display of products? What would a child/adolescent think or say about consuming these products?

Reflect on your observations. Advertising is enticing, persuasive and EVERYWHERE. How deep of an effect does advertising have on us? Is that effect promoting our values? Imagine if the intensity of product advertising was applied with the same force to promote human kindness, to teach compassion, tolerance and understanding, to educate, or to promote health and nutrition. Imagine.

What about how we consume technology? We have only begun to scratch the surface of understanding how our brain works, it's strengths and weaknesses. The powerful influence of screen time is not fully understood in terms of the influence on the human brain. We should proceed with caution. We do know that children, who have television taken away from them, experience classic drug withdrawal symptoms. Smartphones and other screens affect our lives. Technology is rapidly changing the way we communicate, the way we are able to be present to each other. Are we regulating it well? What about the children?

Human beings like shortcuts; our minds react and change with stimulation. Look around...distracted driving is a norm; it's everywhere. Is it that we are all misbehaving intentionally by texting and driving, or are we unaware of how our brain responds to stimulation?

Is being present something that has to be re-learned by children? Re-learned by parents? We have to become knowledgeable about how children experience both the modern world and an online life. Most of those who parent and teach children, grew up without cell phones, i-Anything or more than basic cable. Plugging in often means tuning children out. It's hard to parent, but in being present, you will find more meaningful moments of connection that can increase your happiness this holiday season. Challenge yourself and your family by choosing at least one strategy that feels manageable.

7 Simple Strategies to Give and Receive Presence in Family Life

1. Mindset - Change it by thinking about what is important to you. What values do you want to teach your child/family? Be specific, and write them down. Talk about them with a co-parent or friend. Narrow your list down to the top **three** priorities for this holiday season. Post them on your refrigerator, or text them daily to a co-parent/friend/child. Be intentional, by pointing out when you are modeling a value, to build awareness with your child. Acknowledge yourself for changing your mindset and sticking with your value (giving to others, being patient, being generous, etc.). Acknowledge yourself and your child immediately, when you see her exhibit the value.

Next, meet with your family to encourage a family mindset change. Sit down for a family conversation about holiday values. Engage your family to make a list. Share your own three chosen values for the holidays. Collaborate and revise, so that the three values your family chooses include the child's contribution. You may not have total agreement, but engaging in the conversation together is what is important. What if you don't get buy-in from the family? It is okay to agree to disagree. Change may be slow, but you can still set your own choice of values that will drive YOUR behavior this holiday season.

2. Budget - Set expectations in a friendly manner for the kids, by sharing what is realistic within the family budget. Talk about and teach the difference between 1) what we may want, 2) what we need and 3) what we dream about doing. You may not want to share your actual budget, but you can help your children manage their expectations and support them as they cope with unreachable expectations. Also, children may have feelings about what they want to be able to give as gifts, so helping them budget (or suggesting materials for them to make crafts as gifts) is helpful.

3. Model - Be honest and take a look at what you model. Maybe you want your kids to be helpful, but if you still do it all yourself, you are sending a message that your children do not need to be helpful. Or, maybe you want to increase kindness at home, but your kids only model this at school. Families often want to do something at the holidays to be kind, like serve a meal at a homeless shelter. However, going to serve meals at a shelter is meaningless if families are not kind to each other at home.

4. Talk - Teach Conversation Skills to your children. You may need to disconnect (put down the phone/stop texting), and plan time for family dinner, in order to make time to connect and have a conversation. A conversation is not a monologue. Conversation can be enjoyable if everyone at the table learns to both share and listen.

5. Gift, without Money - Call a friend or a cousin. Write an email/letter to your child or significant other, or even to your boss. If you struggle in your personal relationships, seek family counseling by bringing everyone in to sort it all out. If your children have not learned how to be grateful, find time to gift them by teaching gratefulness, rather than rewarding and reinforcing ungrateful behavior.

6. De-stress - Get rest. Say no to a few parties. Set boundaries about what is feasible. If you can't fathom getting on a plane, do not. If an alcoholic relative triggers you, make time for an Al-Anon meeting.

7. Embrace - Spread and receive love. It will lower your blood pressure and increase your positive mood. Ask for hugs, and ask to give hugs. Aim for at least three embraces daily...remember, you need hugs, as much as you give them out to your children.

Do not strive for perfection. Rather, change your strategies. Family life is messy. Focus on what goes well with what you try. Sprinkle happy feelings by shifting your energy. Not everyone in your family may like the new strategies initially, but give it a few weeks. You may see some unexpected holiday magic work its way back into your family.

Remember, love is a gift delivered by being present and staying connected with others, and love is the best gift to give this holiday season.

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