

Holidays with Young Children, part 2

By Jane Dunbar (1981)

Thanks, Jane, for putting these thoughts on paper almost twenty-five years ago. I have referred to them often while parenting young children. The ideas and activities truly exemplify what we value for young children at TCS: experiences that nurture and stimulate thinking; accommodate and support children's development; and, provide a comfortable, reliable, and predictable environment to help children clarify, order, and make sense of the world!—Cindy Finch

Choices! Choices! Choices! As we head into this holiday time we are, as parents and teachers, bombarded with the need to make decisions that will shape the experience your child has this holiday and the feelings that will color his memories. If our goal is a rich, meaningful, joyful experience for the child, it behooves us, I feel, to take a few moments to look at the season from the point of view of your young child. First I want to stress “your” young child. If the season’s activities are to meet your child’s needs, they must be structured according to what you know of your child. An activity that is meaningful and rich for one child may very well be overwhelming, disinteresting, or exhausting to another. There are not set models that work. Each of us, using our knowledge and sensitivities, must build a series of experiences, step by step, continually asking ourselves questions that focus us back to our own child, his needs, his wants, his unique ways of experiencing.

Next I stress your “young child,” this time with the emphasis on “young child.” It is awing to really think how little experience three, four, and five year olds have with this holiday... perhaps two year’s memories and even those are hazy. This insight gives us lots of permission not to feel the weight of tradition. The child has had very little “tradition” and I imagine most memory focuses more on those things rich, meaningful and joyous in an activity rather than on the particular activity itself. With those thoughts in mind, perhaps some of the following questions will be helpful when choosing holiday experiences:

Involvement. Three, four, and five year olds naturally are active and involved participants. How much of a doer can my child be in this activity? Does the project or activity match my child’s ability level? (Often those wonderful memories we have of an activity we enjoyed as a child was one that we enjoyed when we were older than our own child and we might do well to save it a year or two).

Pace. What pace does my child prefer? Slow and methodical? Active but brief? Settled and quiet? Several short activities?

Routine. Will an activity disrupt my child’s sense of order to the day? Will the disruption delight (add spontaneity)? If one activity fits, will two? Are two brief activities preferable to one long one?

After all this talk about realistically assessing your child’s needs, let me balance these thoughts with strong vote for humor. Treat your family to the best releaser of tension there is: laughter shared and fun together as you prepare for the magic of the season. Keep things simple and relaxed. Fill the moments with music and candlelight, laughter, gentle hugs, unexpected smiles. Let home reflect each family member with decorations made and put up by each member. Share tales of childhood traditions from the family grown-up(s), blending the old with the new. It may not all be like out of House Beautiful but it will be meaningful for each of you. That’s what the holidays are all about.

