

# Reimagining Your Family Christmas

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I recall the painful mall conversation. A few short years ago, my 14-year-old daughter begged me to change Christmas traditions. “Mom, it’s not that we don’t like traditions. We’re almost adults. “

“We loved the traditions when we were younger, ” my 12-year-old daughter added. “We just want to change them so we’re not embarrassed. And we want to include our friends. ”

Change was difficult because I loved all our traditions. So why did I agree? I recounted Luke 2:11: “For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. ” The new, age-appropriate traditions helped our adolescents express the deeper meaning of Christmas, serve others, and demonstrate the importance of the Church and Christ.

Here are 10 child-friendly Christmas traditions my husband and I celebrated with our children when they were younger and how we adapted them to adolescent-friendly traditions after the “mall talk. ”

Which of these traditions can you enjoy with your family this Christmas season?

## **Advent Devotions and Wreath**

Our children are bombarded with a myriad of “Christmas ” messages about Santa, elves, and getting gifts. It’s critical that parents keep the meaning of Christmas alive. Young children can learn that Advent means Jesus’ birthday is coming. An Advent devotional for children, such as *Light for the World: A Catholic Kid’s Guide to Advent and Christmas*, along with an Advent wreath, celebrates the foundation of Christmas—Jesus’ birth.

As your kids enter adolescence, choose Advent readings or an Advent devotional that’s age-appropriate. Developmentally, they can understand and apply the Christmas message. Let them light the candles. Ask them to read the Advent devotional or find one they’d like to share. The real message of

Christmas can be countercultural. So don't give up training your teens in religious traditions.

## **Christmas Ornaments**

Beginning at baby's first Christmas, purchase an ornament that is representative of the year. As ornaments are added annually, store each child's separately; list the year and who it's from. As children decorate the tree with their ornaments, you'll hear them recall, "That's the year I made my first Communion." These ornaments become family heirlooms when your kids move away, so buy yourself an ornament so your tree won't be empty along with your empty nest.

Let early adolescents select their own ornaments. Help them recall the past year's highlights, like camp, babysitting, Confirmation, awards, or sports. With increasing prices, designate a budget. Our daughters spent months hunting for their ornaments.

## **'Happy Birthday, Jesus' Party**

Create "Happy Birthday, Jesus" invitations with your children that are handmade or computer-generated. Ask neighborhood children to bring canned food gifts to donate to the homeless or families in need. During the party, read the Christmas story, sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus, serve birthday cake, and play fun Christmas games.

Early adolescents enjoy going door-to-door (with supervision) to collect canned food from neighbors for the needy at Christmas.

Ensure teens articulate whom the food is for, such as Catholic Charities. Bring along several double-bagged grocery bags. Then deliver groceries to the organization you choose.

## **Christmas Cards and Letters**

For families with young children, send a religious Christmas card, photo card, or family letter that recounts God's blessings. Children can draw Christmas pictures to send with cards.

Christmas is especially busy, so turn the family cards over to your adolescents. Have them design an original Christmas card, write their own

section for the family letter, or create your family's Christmas photo card. This will ensure they like every photo.

## **The 'Perfect' Christmas Tree**

Decide what's more important: the perfect tree or time together. Some parents let their children decorate the tree, but later rearrange ornaments and hope the kids don't notice. If you treasure a "perfect " tree, provide miniature trees for children to decorate.

Let older kids invite a friend to traipse along with the family to choose a tree, followed by a decorating party. Whether they're decorating a fresh or artificial tree, serve hot chocolate and treats.

## **Santa Photos and a Gift for a Needy Child**

When you take your kids' pictures with Santa, plan enough time to purchase a gift for a needy child. Many service organizations sponsor a community Christmas tree with names of children and gift ideas. Save money from recycling cans throughout the year for the gift. Let children scour the mall for the best present.

When adolescents outgrow Santa, they can demonstrate the Christmas message by donating a Christmas tree or bringing gifts to a needy family. If the recycling money comes up short, plan how they can earn the money. They may choose to give or volunteer at an organization like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Blessing others helps teens celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

## **Nativities and the Journey to Bethlehem**

Young children learn best through experiences. The story of Jesus' birth is no exception. Purchase a child-friendly Nativity set that children can play with. Find a local church that performs an outdoor live Nativity. Bundle up and bring hot chocolate to make this treasured memory a valuable way to emphasize the Christmas story.

For adolescents, find a more in-depth experience, such as "Journey to Bethlehem," an outdoor, walk-through drama portraying the birth of Christ. Encourage adolescents to help or volunteer to care for manger animals, become an actor, and invite friends.

## **Sharing with Others**

In anticipation of new clothes and toys, help children select items they no longer use or that don't fit. Give them to someone they know or donate them. Our daughters blessed a family with four girls with their outgrown clothes.

Let teens choose recipients for their outgrown clothes, video games, DVDs, and old toys. Help a family who's recently experienced a disaster, like a fire or flood.

Many religious education classes organize community service projects. Teens select projects and work on them together. Some collect blankets, socks and underwear, or coats, while others help with food baskets.

## **Christmas Mass**

Many Catholic churches offer an early Christmas Eve Mass with a Christmas play or homily designed for children. Some tell the Christmas story during the youth Mass. As children get older, consider an evening Mass.

Adolescents may prefer midnight Mass. They may become weary of the same old Christmas Mass. Maybe this year they can hand out bulletins, become altar servers, or help with the youth Mass.

## **Christmas Morning Pictures**

Parents treasure photos of little ones dressed in pajamas sitting before the Christmas tree. Such sweet recollections as these make this tradition harder to give up.

But don't try this with your adolescents. Take Christmas photos when your teens are dressed up for school events. Snap group photos around the Christmas tree when their friends come over.

Hopefully some of these traditions will inspire your family and generate ideas for adapting your celebrations. Change can be difficult, especially when connected to emotionally laden traditions. Begin to make changes gradually as your children enter early adolescence.

And, by the way, it's OK to keep traditions that are special to you.