

THE HOLIDAY SEASON: PUTTING THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE

By Kim John Payne

Here comes the Holiday Season. Something to look forward to and something that many parents also dread. “The whole thing is like being hit by a sensory tsunami,” commented one mom who was wondering if there was another way to do it. While our kids are living life at such a fever pitch through the school year is it possible to down shift the pace as we move into the holidays?



TOO MUCH, TOO FAST, TOO SOON.

We are now living in a post excess era. We have seen what excess has done to our economy and to our environment. And, hardly a day goes by when we don't see another high profile article about the excess of screen time and digital overload our children are experiencing, most recently, the NYT [Growing Up Digital, Wired For Distraction](#).

What about educational excess? With the national attention of the films [Waiting for Superman](#) and also [Race to Nowhere](#), many are now questioning if education is also a part of the culture of excess.

It's around this time of the year that we are given a chance to make some choices about the pace of life, and it's not easy. Somewhere inside us we know this is a time of “peace on earth”, of family connection (maybe those two images don't exactly line up) and yet the pressure to speed up, do more and brave the “sensory tsunami” of Holiday Season shopping and celebration is acute

THE SIMPLE HOLIDAY SEASON

What about a “Simple Holiday Season”? It could be easy on the wallet and easy on the nerves. It's possible, it really is. Let's establish some ground rules. Four of them to be accurate...

#1. Clutter.

Do we really want more of it in our homes? With the financial pressures most people are under nowadays, the deluge of gifts has not lessened just the amount they cost...“We are just buying more and more senseless stuff” says Heidi Stevens from the Chicago Tribune for their Sunday Magazine. It's stuff we don't want, will likely break, is annoying and just plain junky.

Speak to our major bearers of clutter (I mean gifts), extended family and especially Grandparents about your wish for simplicity. Thank them for raising you in such a way that led you to make conscious parenting choices, that they gave you the strength to not be manipulated by marketers and the morals to not confuse love and

care with “stuff”. Framing a conversation about your parenting values first takes the potential sting out of a request to keep the gifts simple.

#2. Rhythm and Predictability.

The holidays shake the normal rhythms of family life. The normal pillars of our days such as waking up times, school or work, meal and bed times are the things that give our lives shape. This is especially true for children, as it provides a feeling of safety and security. The temptation during the holidays is to let all that go and to relax all those routines. However there is a great big danger here to achieving some semblance of family sanity and it is this... if we take away our well oiled rhythms we take away the structure that makes navigating family life possible. And the double whammy here is that during the holidays we have *more* time together and our family interactions are at their *most* intense.

So here is the tip. Maybe alter the times but not the rituals. The table still needs to be set, teeth brushed, room tidied and so on. If we hold onto these predictable moments in a child’s life they will offer familiar points of decompression and provide safety release valves that are all the more important during the hubbub of holiday season. So, sit down each night, think about it and make some choices that are humble enough to be do-able about the structure of the following day and then, without becoming maniacal, stick to them.

#3 Scheduling.

Rather than adding fuel to the *soul fever* that many of our kids experience during the school year, let’s try and cool it down. Do less. Consider staying at home rather than facing the frenzied airports or frantic highway scenes. Rediscover “the gift of boredom”. If your kids say to you “Dad there’s nothing to do”, your response can be “Mmm, that’s a pity.” If they return saying “But there’s really nothing to do.” Your response, “Oh, that’s really a pity.” LET THEM BE BORED. No TV, no unpaid parent event organizer. You must become more boring than the boredom. Boredom is simply the precursor to creativity. Soon projects, games, creative play breaks out, these activities can last for hours and the big pay off... you get to relax and read a magazine.

#4 Filter Out the Adult World.

“Kids hear way too much adult conversation these days. It amazes me what adults say in front of children,” commented a Grandmother at a recent workshop I was facilitating. This becomes even more intense over the holidays as we spend so much time together in mixed age groups. Three simple questions to ask before you say anything in front of your child, “is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?” If the answer is “yes” to all three then you are on pretty good ground. If not, defer. Say it later when you can enjoy the conversation within adult company.

Excessive TV and computer time is a hot topic and certainly something to be conscious about especially in the holidays. Maybe I'll post some thought on this soon.

Lastly, we hear the word "authenticity" a lot these days, but it especially applies during the Holiday Season. If we are trying to give our kids a balanced life and we are trying to keep it simple, it does not look good to them when we cave in to Holiday Season pressure. Being true to yourself does not have a Holiday Season exclusion clause in the contract and we certainly don't want to model to our kids that values are optional. As touchy a subject as it is, our first loyalty as parents is to our kids, not to their uncles, aunts and grandparents and certainly not to marketers.

In his renown enthusiasm Henry David Thoreau, once wrote to his teacher, Ralph Waldo Emerson.... "Yes! We must simplify, simplify, simplify." Emerson wrote back, "Don't you think one 'simplify' is enough?"