



DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S AFFAIRS

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HAPPY STRESS-LESS HOLIDAYS

No matter what holiday you observe, this season is a time to celebrate with family, friends and loved ones. This year, worries about the economy and loss of jobs might have you saying Bah Humbug! While you like to spread good tidings, you may feel as though your family experiences more anxiety, fatigue, and nagging than cheer. So, is there anything you can do to bring sanity back to the holidays? We think so.

It's All About Me

Overindulgence and "me" attitudes are often prominent during the holidays. From the time the first toy or gadget commercial is aired, how many times do you hear "I want that" ? While materialistic traditions encourage gift-giving, it's not always monetarily possible. There are ways to feel merry without buying gifts.

One family suggests this: chat with each family member about what makes him happy during the holidays and what causes stress. Does she enjoy attending a friend's party or baking at home? Maybe it's the tradition of lighting the menorah together or decorating the tree as a family. Prioritize your holidays around these things. Consider saying no to

events that you've never really enjoyed but attend out of obligations. Remember: "If you always do what you've always done, then you'll always get what you've always gotten". If what you've been doing brings you stress, then you might not want to keep doing it. By weeding out unnecessary activities and expenses, it really can be all about the "me's" in your family.

Renew Your Spirit

Think back to your favorite holiday memories. Chances are that they revolved around simplicity. What makes you feel refreshed and rested rather than frazzled and exhausted? Is it a church or synagogue service? Watching an old holiday movie as a family? Curling up by the fire with a good book and a cup of hot cocoa? Schedule several of these nurturing times for yourself and encourage your family to do the same.

Build in quiet times when you and your kids unplug and unwind. Reading The Story of Hanukkah or The Christmas Story, dusting off old board games or walking the neighborhood to spy the kookiest neighborhood decorations are quickly becoming the new-old tradition.

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The Timeless Gift of Reading

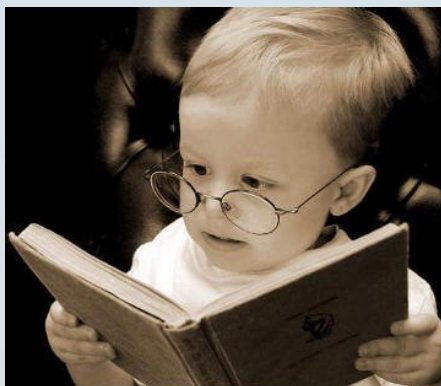
Reading with your child is the best way to prepare him for learning to read and to keep him reading as he grows. Reading aloud together creates a special time for you to bond with your child. This priceless gift offers your precious one what he cherishes most: your attention. The reward to you: it gives you a chance to rediscover favorite stories and find new ones. And the added bonus is that it doesn't have to cost a penny.

Somehow we think we should magically know how to read with our child. If you were fortunate enough to have memories of similar experiences with your own parent, it will come naturally. Just tap into your fondest memories of that activity. If not, don't fret. We've got some tips for you to use today.

Reading with Infants and Toddlers

Reading to infants and toddlers promotes language achievement and literacy development. Later on, it will reap achievement in reading comprehension and overall success in school.

- At this age, it technically doesn't matter if you are reading a cookbook or magazine article. What does matter is exposing your little one to vocabulary and a connection to print. Your infant and toddler responds to the colorful illustrations, the fluctuation in your voice and especially rhyming words.
- Cuddle together in a comfortable setting, place the book in front of her, and read aloud the title and author. As you read through the book, let her touch the pages, encouraging respect for the written word by instructing her not to bite or tear it.
- Talk with your baby about what you are reading. Put yourself into the story by using funny voices, stopping to point out things in the illustrations and allowing him to touch pictures as you go.
- Remember that your child's attention span is short, so it's okay to stop reading if he becomes distracted or fussy. Don't be afraid to start the story and finish it later.



Reading with Young Children

As your child gets older and more exposed to books, let him choose the title he wants you to read. You may find that he wants to read the same book over and over, even if he's outgrown it. While this might be boring for you, the repetition and familiarity of the story, including the child helping tell it or "read" it as he gets older, is part of the magic.

- Let your child hold the book. As you look at the cover, ask her what she thinks the story is about.
- As you read, discuss things that your child may have in common with the characters or setting of the story.
 - Change your voice to fit the mood or action. Move your finger under the words as you read them.
 - Talk about the pictures. Ask him to describe the illustrations. Explain words and phrases as you read. Allow him to ask questions or make comments.
- Let your child "read" the book to you. It may be a short story or a long imaginative tale. Listen and ask questions to encourage creativity.



*Some material used by permission and adapted from **The Tradition of Reading During the Holidays** by Cathy P. Miller, President, TLA, Inc. Home of the Literacy Ambassador® 256-883-7005 cathytmiller@comcast.net www.readingisforeveryone.org*

*Some material adapted from **Reading is Fundamental** at www.rif.org*

Reading with Tweens and Teens

Today's tweens and teens are over-stimulated by video games and TV and the thought of reading a book for pleasure might leave them disinterested. This doesn't mean they have to stop reading altogether. There are plenty of ways to keep reading beyond the books.

- Tune into the interests your child has. If he loves a particular sport, provide ways for him to learn more about it through articles, brochures, tip sheets and reviews. Magazines and newspapers often have sections geared toward your child and are generally written from a kid's point of view. He can identify with the tone and subject matter of magazines that you consider "fluffy."
- With all of the immediate access, kids are more in tune with music than ever. Let a music-obsessed child read lyrics to her favorite music. Many CD liners provide the lyrics or she can search online. While there, she can also read about the artist, songwriter and behind the scene info on the video.
- Tweens and Teens are striving for independence, yet still want to be connected to their families. Let her see you reading your favorite book and explain why it's important to you. Create a tradition of exchanging books with each other (sharing only books that are appropriate reading for her). This will give you insight into her world while nurturing her desire for connection.
- Trends are revealing an increased interest in local and national events among this age. Share editorials and newspaper articles, discussing them after.
- Tweens and teens are thinking about what they will do in their lives-college, careers, their future families. Lead him to books that introduce a wide range of opportunities and experiences.
- Rather than picking a movie based on its packaging, take your child to the rental store and read the story description on the back. Challenge her to find a good story based on the plot rather than the marketing.

If you begin reading to your child when he is young, he is much more likely to become a reader himself. If you missed out on reading to your child when he was young, it's not too late. One way to encourage any age child to read, is to let him see you reading for pleasure often. By reading with your child, not only will you give him a bright future in his education, but you'll create connections that will last a lifetime.

Choosing Books for Children of All Ages

Try out different books to see which one appeals to your child.

As soon as your child starts showing preference for one over another, let him choose his own book.

Guide your child to books that are related to his own interests.

Visit the library frequently and get to know the librarian, who can be a great resource.

Unless requested by her teacher, if your child does not like a book, put it away. Reading is a fun time to share, not a time to fight.



Stay on Budget

The best gift to you and your family is to not over-extend yourself financially. Some people feel guilty about not being able to afford presents so they pull out the credit card, only to find in January that they still can't afford it. Don't let your holiday joy turn to January regret. Financial planners say to make a cash budget and STICK TO IT. One way to do this is to put money on a prepaid credit card, which permits you to spend only funds you've deposited while allowing you access to in-store and on-line merchants. You can reload the card as needed.

Here are some other suggestions:

- Take all credit cards, except your prepaid card, out of your wallet.
- Set a holiday budget (don't forget non-gift items like cards, stamps, décor and food). Write it down and keep up with your expenses.
- Just use cash. When you get paid, take out cash and divide it into envelopes marked gifts, food, etc. When envelopes are empty, stop spending.

Get Organized Early

You've already talked with your family about their choice for the season's festivities, now you need to organize it all.

Use a small notebook (one that can easily be transported) to keep up with events and who needs to go where. Including a calendar in the notebook might be of help. Also write down all the people for whom you plan to buy gifts, ideas for each gift and a price point for each. If there is a specific toy that your child has seen in a newspaper ad, cut it out and staple it in the notebook, making note of the store. Having a picture will assist you and the store clerk in finding the item. *Hint: This is top-secret information, so don't let the book get in the wrong hands!* Additionally, plan holiday meals and list menu items that you'll need to purchase. You can keep recipes in the notebook for quick reference.

Keeping up with receipts will help you stay on budget and are needed for returns. To make this task easy, staple an envelope on the inside or back cover of the notebook and place each receipt in it as you make a purchase.

At the end of the season, you can tally your receipts for a sum of holiday expenditures.

Laugh. Love. Live!

Did you know that laughter is a powerful antidote to stress? It relaxes your muscles for up to 45 minutes after and releases endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemical. So, do a lot of it this holiday. Get together with family and friends and share humorous stories and jokes or watch a comedy together. (info from www.helpguide.org)

Savor the season by spending time with those you cherish and forgiving those you don't. Rekindling estranged relationships just might be the cure for your stress.

Like every year, the holidays will come and go and they'll be over before you know it. You only get one chance a year to enjoy the fa-la-la-las, so decide what makes the holidays special to you and your family. Treasure the season and remember that you set the tone for your family.

Holiday Money-Saving Tips:

Host pot-luck dinners where everyone brings a dish or decide to alternate host locations.

Draw names for gifts instead of giving to every person or play White Elephant, just with desirable gifts. Either way, set a price-limit.

Wrap gifts with butcher paper, decorating with ink stamps and top with a bow. Or spray old paint cans and decorate with glitter, stuff with tissue paper and the gift.

If you have the time, make gifts such as homemade jam and cookies. These make great gifts for teachers, neighbors and church staff.

Give family gifts instead of individual gifts.

Buy items for next year on the few days following this year's holiday.

Keep holiday clothing simple: A red sweater out of your closet with a newly purchased scarf is a timeless combination.

Family Holiday Traditions

Write a letter to each person to be opened during the season. Store the letters in an old box and add to it each year.

Play a holiday trivia game. This is always fun in my family. You can download facts and trivia from the internet or go to your local library for a book that relates to your holiday. Come up with 10 multiple choice questions to call out, provide a sheet of paper for each member to record their answers and give a "trophy" to the winner. Each year, your family competes for the trophy.

Create a baking day, where you come together as a family and bake your favorite treats to eat or give away. End the evening with a holiday movie.

Read a book together. My family has been reading the same two books since I was a child. It is expected and anticipated.

Volunteer as a family. Nothing unites a family together like giving to others. It provides a message to your children that giving is much more than laying down cash. Giving your time, effort and kindness is more rewarding than receiving.

Create a holiday story book. You don't have to be a scrapbook expert to do this. Ask each member to write or type a favorite story or memory. This can be an opportunity to write things you are thankful for, highlights from the past year and funny quotes said throughout the year. Compile the pages into a notebook to be viewed every year.

Frugal Ways to Entertain Your Guests

You don't have to go to a lot of expense or effort to entertain your guests. Here are ideas for kids from 1-92.

- We've mentioned this before; ask everyone to bring a dish.
- Ask them to also bring their favorite board game. Instead of sitting around a TV or table for four hours, keep the day moving with a game of checkers, Monopoly® or cards. Be sure there are games for the little ones, too. Puzzles and cards like Go Fish are great inexpensive options.
- Move the crowd outside if weather permits. Organize a touch football game or other outdoor activity.
- For the performers in your bunch, ask them to put on a quick holiday play. Some families have made this a tradition, adding roles as the family increases.
- Get everyone involved in setting the table and decorating. Wait until everyone arrives and assign duties.
- Set up a card-writing area. Local nursing homes, shelters and our troops overseas love to get cards for any occasion. Have guests write a note or have pre-made cards ready for them to sign.
- Play party games. From the classic charades to exchanging prank gifts.
- Don't leave out the toddlers. Set up an area where they can safely play with toys they bring.

A LITTLE EXTRA JINGLE IN YOUR POCKET:

There is a current myth among job searchers: Job searching between November-January is a waste of time. The fact is, whether you want a full-time permanent position or a seasonal part-time job, looking between November and January does have its advantages. Susan Heathfield, a Human Resource Guide with About.com says this about end-of-year job searching: "You have the opportunity to help people spend their budgets before year end. Hiring managers, with fresh goals for the new year, are eager to find people who can help them get the jump on goal accomplishment. If nothing else, many organizations interview in December for positions starting at the first of the year." In other words, if you are looking for a job, now is a good time to look.

Holiday Hiring Projection:

Toys R Us will hire 35,000

AT&T has 1,000 openings

UPS- 200+

HH Greggs- 800+

Hickory Farms will hire 4,000

If you are considering part-time, in her article, Top Three Benefits of Holiday Jobs (www.families.com), Sherry Holetzky states that while a holiday job might not provide many standard employee benefits, these seasonal jobs could lead to more.

- Holiday jobs can create great opportunities for people who have been laid off or otherwise lost a job, for stay home parents re-entering the workforce, or for young people just starting out, to eventually land a great job. Even if they don't result in something permanent, it's a great way to fill in those empty spaces on your resume.
- Since most holiday jobs are part-time, they might offer the perfect schedule for those already working a full-time job, are in school, or have children.

- Many companies that hire extra help during the holidays, offer discounts on their products and services even for temporary employees. Besides making extra money, you'll save on purchases.

Tips to get you started *(Some material by Ashley M. Heher with The Sun Sentinel)*

- First, recognize that some employers want experience and others just want a jolly attitude. Customer service positions usually require prior experience including actual retail sales, trouble-shooting, people skills, and staying calm in frazzled situations. Even if some of this experience is from a job ten years ago, it's still worth talking about. "Customer service experience is, by far, the most important criterion that everyone is looking for," says Patrick Tomlinson, senior vice president with Aon Corporation. Other organizations aren't just looking for retail veterans. Sometimes a good personality and a strong work ethic can get you the job. Spokeswoman, Jennifer Albano at Toys R Us Inc. says, "We're looking for hardworking, reliable employees who want to help shoppers find the perfect gift for the special child in their lives." The country's largest toy store considers retail experience a plus but not a requirement.
- Start filling out applications as soon as the company will accept them. Some start hiring as early as October. Many employers want the employees to start in November and work through the first of January.



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Tips to get you started (continued)

- Look in newspapers, online and go door-to-door. Some employers don't bother to advertise, so go to the place of business and ask if they're hiring. Aon's researchers found merchants were most likely to hire people referred by other employees and walk-ins.
- As much as possible, be flexible with your schedule. Employers know that parents have some limitations due to child care and a second job, just be flexible in the areas you can be. In other words, it's best not to say you can't work on Tuesday night because your favorite TV show comes on.

Where to look *(Some material by Tory Johnson with www.abcnews.com)*

- The most obvious places are retail stores, especially those with toys. They will hire greeters, demonstrators, wrappers, stockers, cashiers and even characters and entertainers to help boost holiday moods. Discounters and other low-price stores are expected to do relatively well as shoppers try to save this year.
- Look at both big box and family-owned. Big box stores have big established work forces, which means that they might need less part-time holiday help. Locally-owned stores have smaller full-time staffs. Retail phone companies such as AT&T and Verizon know that many people will buy phones this year, so they are hiring extra personnel. The same goes for electronic retail stores.
- Other retailers such as gas station and convenience stores, restaurants, movie rental and theatres are also good places to look.
- According to a report by ABC News, UPS will hire 50,000 seasonal package handlers and drivers' helpers. Local independent delivery services are also hiring walkers, bikers and drivers. Look them up in the phone book or just go by.
- Security Firms are another option since they beef up patrol to safeguard the big crowds in stores.

Top 5 Jobs for Kids, Teens and College Students

1. **Baby-sitting**- Parents scramble to find babysitters. Let your family and neighbors know you can help with their two-legged and four-legged kids.
2. **Cleaning**- Whether families are preparing for company or cleaning up after them, many just want somebody else to do it.
3. **Shopping**- Many elderly and disabled adults have a list of items they need and require help getting them. You can offer a personal shopping service, either at the mall or online. You can combine this with cleaning and add cooking for a full-line service.
4. **Gadget training**- Most kids are experts at computers, phones and other electronics. Enterprising kids can market their talent to people who are willing to pay.
5. **Wrapping and delivering**- This might start as a seasonal job, but can carry on through the year: Wrapping and delivering gifts for businesses, friends and family at the holidays, birthday and anniversary gifts at other times.

Disclaimer: With any of these services: first recognize whether you are qualified to perform the service. If so, create a rate plan, write a simple contract to be signed by both parties, be dependable, and spend your pay wisely!

A LITTLE EXTRA JINGLE IN YOUR POCKET:

So, what if companies have already hired someone else?

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Many businesses stop the hiring process in November, so if you've missed this timeline, there are other creative places to look. Some are opportunities in which the whole family can participate:

- **Personal Services:** Set up your own personal service business. Think of the things people need during the holidays: shopping, wrapping, shipping, writing cards. Many businesses, such as attorneys and accountants send hundreds of cards each year. They often look to outsource this. Let them buy the supplies and offer to do the labor for them. If you have the knack for wrapping presents, offer to wrap their employees' and customers' gifts. It might only take two large accounts or several small ones to keep you busy. Businesses will probably ask for a reference list, so a good place to start is with family and friends. In the beginning, you can place an ad in a thrifty paper or distribute among your friends and neighbors. Once a customer base is established, word-of-mouth should be all the advertising you need. There is a caution here: since these are services you are providing, you are also liable for the quality of service and any damage. It's a good idea to look into this further before committing your services.
- An increasing number of families are reducing holiday busyness by hiring caterers for their holiday dinners and parties. Local catering and party-planning companies might need help with cooking, delivering or set up.
- Customer service and help desk centers have an increased call volume due to solving issues and troubleshooting purchases.
- If customer service is not your forte', you can still get a job in retail. 'Tis the season for inventory, which means retailers hire extra help to perform this task. With all the extra merchandise coming in, receivables employees are also needed to check in inventory. Again, contact all types of stores to see if they're hiring for any of these positions.
- Many tax preparation agencies are training for 2010 tax season.
- Beginning in January, weight-loss facilities and gyms will see an increase in memberships and need personnel to take calls, do secretarial work and work one-to-one with clients.



Turn part-time into full-time

Brent Rasmussen with Careerbuilders.com says that 31% of employers are willing to hire their part-time employees as full-time. He provides a few tips:

- When you speak to the hiring manager, tell them you are interested in full-time work.
- Show enthusiasm. Go above and beyond the minimum.
- Be teachable-be willing to learn something new every day.
- Treat the part-time or seasonal job as if it were your only job.
- Whether short-term or part-time, it's an audition. Think of it as an extended job interview.
- Be a team-player. Listen to and get to know your colleagues, one of them just might recommend you for full-time or another position.

Links to Jobs in Alabama

www.toysrus.com

www.upsjobs.com

www.snagajob.com

www.hickoryfarms.com

www.blockbuster.com

www.alabamajobs.com

www.joblink.alabama.gov



The time of giving is upon us, so it's a perfect opportunity to reflect on what true giving is.

For many, the holidays are a happy, joyful time, surrounded by family and friends. For others, it's a lonely time, made worse by the fact that those around them are celebrating.

The exchanging of money and material goods is commonplace and simple. We give and in return get back. There's a deeper level to giving and it's called: giving of yourself.

In early years, giving was actually "giving up", a giving away of one's self, not of one's means. People gave of their time and energy as opposed to monetary gifts. With the age of affluence, entered materialism. And unselfish acts and words were replaced with giving to please the giver and not the gifted.

There's a saying: **a present is something you give because you want the recipient to have it. A gift is something the recipient actually wants** (paraphrased).

How many neckties have dads received? How many men have been successful in picking out the right style, let alone size, for their beloved? Do we give just for the sake of giving or do we really think about what the other person needs? And not material things, things of the heart?

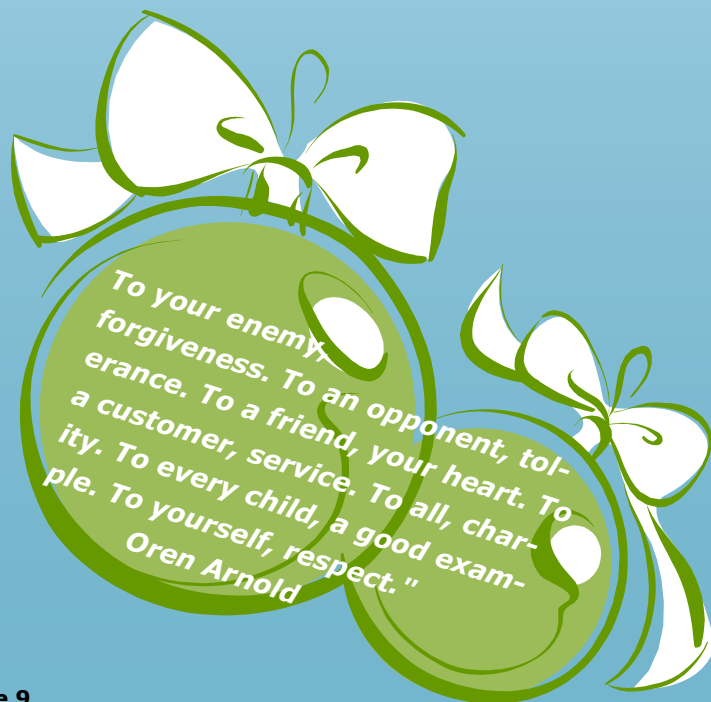
Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." For many, a simple word of encouragement is the best gift they could

ever receive. For others, it may be an hour of your undivided attention. "Quality time is more than mere proximity" says Gary Chapman, author. Putting away the cell phone, turning off the TV and focusing on the other person, is a gift worth millions.

Sometimes simple acts of service like mending a shirt or repairing a leaking faucet speak louder than any material gift.

As you go through these next few months, think of those who might be forgotten: the homeless, the elderly, the disabled, and poor. Think of ways that you can give to them, whether it's visiting a nursing home

or a widowed neighbor. Perhaps a lady down the street is unable to care for her yard. Many shelters need volunteers to spend time with the homeless. You don't have to look far, even in your own home, to find ways to give of your heart. There is only one rule: do it out of love, not out of obligation or with the hope of getting anything in return. In doing this you'll have learned the true art of giving!



The Absent Parent and the Holidays

Whether parents are apart by divorce, death, work or military, the separation can be difficult for children at any time. The holidays may present new challenges as they can be a painful reminder that things aren't as they used to be. It can be just as difficult for parents as well. Therapist, Beverly Waldman Rich, outpatient services at Bradley Hospital, says there are ways parents can ease this tension and create happy holiday memories for their children and themselves.

- Plan ahead in November so the children can anticipate and prepare for what is going to happen. Ask for input from older children and do your best to accommodate within reason. If you are divorced, as hard as it is, don't put a guilt trip on your children about their desire to spend a day with the other parent. Also, keep in mind that children, especially young ones, want to buy gifts for the divorced parent but might not know how to do it and feel awkward asking for help.
- "Traditions are the glue that stabilize kids and help them



feel secure," says Waldman Rich. Keep old traditions and make a few new ones.

- If possible, have the absent parent write a letter or make an audio or video tape

of themselves reading a special holiday book or preparing the traditional holiday dessert. Kids can create a video of themselves to give to the parent. Even a simple message can be very helpful in filling some of the void each party feels. If the parent is not available, take the time to make a special collage of pictures and special memoirs of time together. Use this time to share stories.

- Many parents believe that if they over indulge their children with gifts, that it will compensate for the guilt they feel. Choose one special gift to share with your children or choose one tradition, either old or new, to share together. On the flip side, some absent parents do not participate in gifting their children. It's good to validate your children's disappointment, but do so without putting down the other parent.
- If your children feel sadness, let them express their emotional pain in a safe environment, validating their feelings. Even if a parent does not feel exactly like their children, the parent can probably relate to the loss of some aspect of past family life.
- While trying to make the holidays special for your children, don't neglect yourself. Seeking companionship from relatives, co-workers and friends are good ways to reduce stress. Relieving your own stress will have a positive impact on your child.

The Alabama Department of Children's Affairs *Working Together To Improve the Lives of Alabama's Children*

The Alabama Parent Network

The Parent Network serves as a state partner on parent leadership initiatives and parent education. The goal is to support the varied needs of parents while enhancing their ability to support their children and to connect parents with available resources.

PARENTALK

A Publication for Alabama's Parents

To comment on this issue or to tell us what you'd like to see in future issues, contact:

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