

Making Memories for the Holidays

No matter how often you've heard it—it's not about stuff

By Janis Hashe

Think back to your own treasured holiday memories. Sure, you might recall getting that long-desired bike or Barbie—but didn't more of your favorite times center around fun activities, visits from beloved relatives, family jokes and, of course, food?

In the hurly-burly of the holiday season, it's easy for us all to lose track of what really makes memories. And for yet another year, many families remain on tight, or at least tighter, budgets, unable to buy huge numbers of presents. But in talking to both experts and local parents, we discovered what we really knew all along—your kids might love that Wii, but they love your attention even more. So this year, celebrate your family traditions—and think about creating a new one that will become a memory forever.

The best gift of all: you

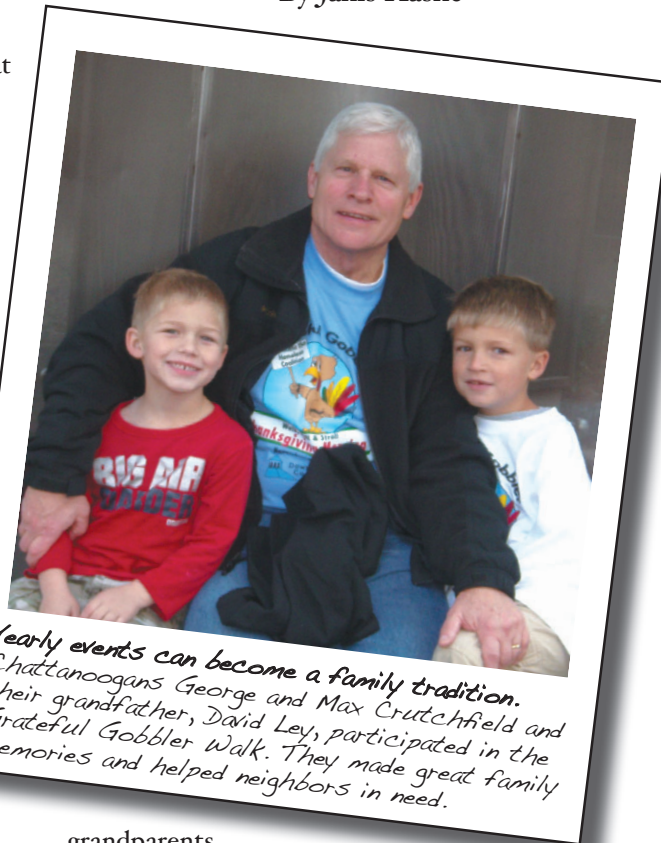
Michael Smith, Psy.D., associate professor of psychology at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, PA, says the most important thing to remember is that, "Kids don't need 'things' from their parents. They need their parents."

According to Smith, "The best and most lasting holiday memories come from our relationships with each other, not from a material object."

He recommends parents should decide what kind of Christmas they want for their family without letting media expectations or demands or relatives tell you what to do. "Families should decide for themselves, informed by their own traditions and faith." He says people should ask themselves, "In 30 years, what would I want my kids to remember about Christmas—the presents or family traditions?"

"According to research on memory, people don't remember specifics, they remember impressions—positive experiences with people," he explains. "And if you, as the parent, are completely stressed out over the holidays, *that's* what your child will remember."

While acknowledging that many parents cannot afford to take extra time off during the holidays, he suggests that those who can, do, in order to plan an evening event or "a whole afternoon together." For those who can't, "make a holiday breakfast together," he adds. Dr. Smith points out that smaller children in particular respond well to consistency—for example, always visiting



Yearly events can become a family tradition. Chattanooga's George and Max Crutchfield and their grandfather, David Ley, participated in the Grateful Gobbler Walk. They made great family memories and helped neighbors in need.

grandparents at the same time on the same day each year.

And speaking of grandparents, Smith says establishing traditions can replace materialism. For example, he says preparing holiday meals or attending church services will help children understand what the holiday is truly about. "It's important to set limits on what grandparents are giving children," he says. "Otherwise, they may be unconsciously sabotaging what you are attempting to accomplish."

Stories about creating memories

Several Chattanooga moms contributed tales and suggestions from their own family memories and traditions.

Linda Moss Mines modestly notes, "My favorite holiday tradition is not that unusual—as a family, we always made ornaments."

"What might be a bit unique about our tradition is that each year, the children created or painted two ornaments that were just alike (more or less) and then dated each ornament. When each child established his/her own home, one of our first gifts was a box of ornaments from their first Christmas (we painted that one), through the last Christmas

at home. Tony and I were able to keep an entire set, too. Those ornaments catalog the years of their lives, and their memories, too. Jason, 36, and Raz, 30, are still a bit sentimental about that tradition. We continue painting ornaments to this day and have begun the tradition with our granddaughter. Someday, she'll have her own Christmas history box.

"I can't tell you how many years we laughed about creating a specific ornament—for example, Raz's 'mouse' that really looks like a giant rat or Jason's sunburned Santa. Those laughs are balanced by the times we've sniffled a bit because the years have gone by so quickly."

Mom Mandy Senn told us, "Every year on Christmas Eve, my father-in-law calls all the grandchildren and plays Santa Claus. He asks if they have been good this year, and tells them that he received their Christmas lists. He even tells them that he is excited to visit their house later on and will check on them while they are sleeping. It is truly amazing to talk with the grandchildren after the phone call to see their amazement and excitement that they actually got to speak to Santa!"

Not herself a mom, Suzanne Roach had a lovely memory to share: "I always loved watching my mother make homemade divinity candy. The weather had to be just right, and you knew it was a good batch if the mixer started to strain right before she finished. The last touch was to press a pecan half in the center of each one that was carefully dolloped on the wax paper. We could

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barely wait for the divinity to cool before we ate it all up! That white, fluffy confection has always reminded me of a happy holiday homecoming."

And *Chattanooga Parent* contributor Julianne Hale is a memory-making expert. "Here are some of our holiday traditions," she wrote:

"I tend to be old school when it comes to

traditions and want to make sure that my children feel some family unity around the holidays and have concrete events that happened every holiday season. As a result, I've consciously created some of our own Hale family traditions.

"1. The brutally honest Christmas Letter: This started six years ago after I visited my parents and read some of the Christmas letters their friends had sent. They touted the accomplishments of their 2-year-old grandchildren and each person's description read like a resume. I try to poke fun at those folks by highlighting the mediocre accomplishments of my family. Everyone gets a kick out of it and I save all of the letters, along with Christmas photos from that year in our holiday scrapbook.

"2. The Gingerbreads in the Stockings: Lots of friends told me about the *Elf on the Shelf* book and how much fun they'd had with it. I liked the idea but my frugal mind couldn't bear the thought of dropping \$30 on the book. So, I went to the Dollar Tree and bought stuffed gingerbreads for each of my children and created a similar, albeit much cheaper, tradition. The gingerbreads arrive on the mantle on December 1 with a note from Santa explaining that they are to be put in their corresponding stocking each night and one of Santa's elves will hide them while they sleep along with a written task that the family must complete together. Tasks include:

- Making cookies
- Driving to look at holiday lights
- Writing a letter to Santa
- Stringing a garland for the tree
- Watching a holiday movie

"This forces the family to spend time together every day leading up to Christmas and the kids really enjoy it. We've done it for three years now." ❧

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An idea for a family tradition

If you're trying to convert the grandparents from overly indulgent gift giving, getting them involved in a different way—a way that leads to lifelong memories—might be just the ticket. Linda Mastaglio has a suggestion:

"I developed a series of coloring books that grandparents can use with their grandkids. The kids color in the pictures of decade-specific pictures (like the first TV dinner) and the grandparent writes his/her memories about the first time they tried a TV dinner. Then the children can hold onto them as keepsakes from grandparents, almost like oral history projects. They also stimulate conversation between the generations. The books are decade specific (life in the 50s, 60, and 70s). The next book in the series is *Life in the 40s*."



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