

## Starting or Maintaining Family Traditions in Times of COVID

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Around the holidays, family traditions often bring back positive childhood memories for parents and create future memories for children.

Researchers distinguish “autobiographical memory,” which involves personal events and experiences, from other types of memory, such as recollections of factual information learned in school. Family stories pass down autobiographical memories from one generation to the next and often become the source of family traditions.

In this time of COVID when many long-standing traditions will not be possible, how can families start new traditions or maintain old ones (even in a modified way) to promote family fun and lasting memories? Here are just a few possibilities.

**Food.** Many family traditions involve preparing and eating special foods, which is still possible even during the pandemic. Children can brainstorm ideas of what to cook or bake—either traditional family recipes or new ones. Roles in the preparation can be tailored to the age of the child (think pouring ingredients in the bowl and stirring for preschoolers, chopping vegetables for adolescents). Cooking, baking, and eating with family members at a distance is possible over a video call if everyone has their own ingredients and chats while they prepare the food and eat.

**Music.** Hearing a favorite holiday song often brings back memories. Share these songs with children. Many choirs, symphonies, and other musical groups have been resourceful this year in finding ways to perform over Zoom or in other physically distanced ways, so it might be possible to take in holiday music in real-time. Sing and make music at home, too—children will remember the fun, even if everyone is off-key.

**Building anticipation.** Many family traditions around the holidays involve building anticipation toward a culminating celebration. Opening a daily window in an advent calendar leading to Christmas. Lighting an additional candle in the menorah on each day of Hanukkah. Lighting daily Kinara candles leading to the final Kwanzaa feast. These traditions give parents

opportunities to build anticipation as they share with children the beliefs and values that accompany the holidays.

Reaching out to loved ones. Professor Karen Fingerman and her colleagues have studied older and younger adults' reactions to receiving holiday cards. Even if adults have had no contact with the senders for a year, older adults, in particular, felt more socially connected the more cards they received. Younger adults were more likely to want to build social relationships with people who sent them cards. Regardless of whether the greetings are sent through the regular mail or social media, involve children in reaching out to loved ones to foster these social connections.

Giving. The holidays offer an opportunity for parents to help children appreciate the joys of giving. Homemade gifts and cards are often the most cherished. Parents can help children take others' perspectives in thinking about what would be meaningful gifts for family members and friends. Parents can also help children understand the importance of giving to people in need through donations of time or money to the Salvation Army, Toys for Tots, or other charitable organizations.

Children typically appreciate spending time with happy, loving parents more than they appreciate any of the trappings of holidays that often make parents feel stressed and grumpy. Despite the many joys of holiday traditions, the holidays also tend to be a stressful time. Financial worries can be exacerbated by feeling obligated to spend money on gifts. Time pressures can be multiplied with additional cooking, decorating, shopping, and other activities that often feel burdensome on top of ongoing daily responsibilities.

If family traditions seem too difficult to maintain this year, do not worry. Children are resilient and may end up having the fondest memories of creative new approaches to celebrating the holidays. Perhaps some new traditions will be born!