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## Introduction

*A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank balance was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove – but the world may be a different place because I was important in the life of a child.*

FOREST E. WITCRAFT

What is ‘Conscious Parenting’? Conscious Parenting describes the approach of parents who try to stay open-minded and present with their child’s needs and behaviours. Conscious Parenting is the care of children that emerges when we see the world from a child’s perspective and understand the important stage of childhood. Children are not little adults; they have their own world, their own way of looking at life. Conscious Parenting asks: What is important in that world? What do I need to provide to truly nurture childhood and create a happy home? Many answers to these questions are found in this book, which is full of suggestions I have practised and insights I have applied in my personal and professional life with children.

In this book we will explore the ways that connection, creativity and communication in family life lay the foundation for a happy childhood and a happy home. I call these keys to happiness ‘the three ‘C’s’. It is these three ‘C’s’ working together that leads to the big ‘C’: consciousness. It is through practising connection, creativity and communication at home that we arrive at conscious parenting.

No microchip is downloaded the moment we become parents. We do not know how to deal with challenging discipline issues, provide positive play spaces or create Christmas craft! *Happy Child, Happy Home* is a parenting guide to take along on the journey. It will support you as you develop the ideas and awareness that

foster happy and healthy children and make a house a home. This book aims to cover a very broad range of topics in one easy read. It is for parents to pick up when they seek inspiration, support, information or guidance.

I have witnessed families where the three 'C's were not present; it was evident to me that day-to-day life was a struggle for both parent and child. And, having helped parents discover the three 'C's, I have then watched positive transformations in the family home.

The ideas in *Happy Child, Happy Home* aim to develop calm and happy children who feel connected to their loved ones. Rather than this being hard work for parents, it is a way to joy and makes the parenting journey easier. This book envisages the home as a creative environment that fosters positive behaviours and a strong bond between parent and child.

*Happy Child, Happy Home* is written in a highly practical way. Note that the title is not 'Perfect Parenting'. I know how hard it can be! I have years of training and experience in caring for children, yet I am not a perfect parent – far from it. I also know that if we were perfect, this would ultimately be difficult for our children: living up to 'perfection' is impossible! Conscious Parenting involves being aware of when things in the family are not working, and being willing to change them. I do strive to become more aware of my shortcomings and make changes (albeit slowly at times).

Family life can be seen as an 'emotional bank account': large withdrawals will happen from time to time. Challenges are inevitable as we go through the years, so we need to put in positive deposits on a daily basis. Investments from stable, happy and connected times see us through patches of disconnection or anger. *Happy Child, Happy Home* is full of practical ideas that can function as deposits in the family's emotional bank account, and stop you from going into the red!

Over the past twenty years I have sought to understand children's developmental needs through my work as a teacher in primary, special needs and Rudolf Steiner settings; as a playgroup leader and parenting workshop facilitator; and of course in parenting my own two children. This book contains much of what I have seen and learnt, but I have also included many other voices, including the real stories of parents who have talked with me, thoughts from a

dad's perspective (Michael), and words from my son, Jayson, at the age of seven, so a child can also be heard here.

The thought of writing this book came to me when I was pregnant with my first child. After the birth I was so inspired by parenting and the joys of early childhood I embarked on a fourteen-year quest to explore what might make a happy child, a happy home, a happy Earth. I wrote on bits of paper everywhere I went, and even asked for a dictaphone from Father Christmas to note my inspirations. I tried different activities and approaches, fell down at times, picked myself up, and tried again! I wrote notes because I always wanted to share my tips and discoveries with other parents. This book is the result, and it is one I would have loved as a new parent.

For me, parenting is not about theories – I am far from being an academic; what we need are the practical ideas and approaches that make everyday family life full of love, joy and (where possible!) fun. There are many books about parenting, but for me the essence of it all is building a strong family life. All the parenting tips I have presented are about connecting, communicating and creating together as a family.

A child's pivotal, formative experiences happen within family life. The quality of family life shapes a child's future attitudes, and colours their approach to the world. As parents, we are the creators of our children's experiences; we shape their whole framework for being and understanding. When we are more conscious, we enhance children's potential to become happy, centred and fulfilled adults. While this is a big statement, it is the small, everyday ideas for family life that make the BIG difference. Conscious Parenting is not about doing entirely new or major things with your children; it is the everyday little things that matter.

All the ideas in this book have been tried and tested. They have put smiles on children's faces, created happy hearts, and enhanced the bonds between parents and children. Small changes count. Throughout this book, we discover together how to make ordinary family moments extraordinary. I hope to empower even the least creative parent (really, there's no such thing – have courage!) to become a story-teller and to provide wonderful times of making and doing for their young ones. Children will love you for it! I also explore creative discipline; that is, tools for transforming behaviour in a positive manner.

You might like to write down thoughts and points in a journal while reading this book. This will help ground and reinforce ideas you discover that relate to your family, and assist in putting them into action. Many of the new ideas here take only minutes to try but might lead to long-term change and become part of your happy home.

Chapters One, Two and Three of *Happy Child, Happy Home* are about positive family rhythms. Chapter One is full of suggestions for structuring days with children and making ordinary moments, like mealtimes or bedtimes, a bit extraordinary. Chapter Two gives ideas for celebrating annual festivals like birthdays and Christmas. Chapter Three has activities that will bring us closer to the four seasons.

Chapter Four discusses craft, creativity and easy ways we can make things together with our children. Chapter Five explains the joy of storytelling, and shares ideas that will help parents make up their own tales to delight their young ones. Chapters Six and Seven reinforce the importance of imaginative play in children's lives and discuss ways of supporting play in our homes.

Chapter Eight delves beneath the surface to see how parents can nurture children's twelve senses and so foster health and happiness. Chapter Nine on creative discipline gives practical tools for transforming children's everyday challenging behaviours into positive outcomes. Chapter Ten explains the Four Temperaments, leading to a greater understanding of your children.

And Chapter Eleven contains a checklist of 101 ways you can make your household more environmentally sustainable.

At the end of my days I know the question in my mind will be, 'Did I connect enough to my loved ones?'

Parents have the most important job on the planet: guiding the next generation. Our efforts positively affect the health and happiness of our children and family life, now and for generations to come. Let's aim to keep our minds and hearts wide open (without judging ourselves too harshly!) to consciously observe how our parenting is shaping our children and the Earth. This is a lifetime journey for us all.

Blessings along the road!

## *Chapter One*

# Positive Family Rhythms

*Stop the glorification of busy!*

ANON

The universe has rhythms. Day and night, the seasons of the year, and high and low tides are examples of the perfectly balanced rhythms of our planet. We have rhythms inside us: our heartbeat, our breathing and our walking pace.

Positive family rhythms – daily, weekly and yearly routines and rituals – provide a foundation of stability, trust, love and connection for a household. This foundation leads to happier, more settled children. Family rhythms help to keep life in balance, and children love them!

## Are You Leading a Hurried Life?

I heard parenting author Steve Biddulph talking about the book he wrote with his wife, Sharon, *The Complete Secrets of Happy Children* (Thorsons), and a comment he made then has stayed with me: 75 per cent of discipline and behavioural problems are caused by the hurry that parents are in. How rushed are we, and how rushed are we making our children? Faster is not necessarily better! It is harder to connect with each other when going at great speed. It's good to slow down, look into our children's eyes, observe what is happening around us and smell the roses. And let our children smell them too!

As children grow, they want to do more on their own. It requires time and patience to allow them to do up their own buttons or

shoelaces. Rushing out of the door does not give children the time to accomplish what they want and need to do for themselves and for their development. Nor does it give them time to truly play and relax (we discuss the importance of imaginary play later). Overstimulated, tired and hurried children can be very grumpy. (As can adults, too!)

Let's spend a day being less busy. In this chapter I suggest putting a day into your weekly routine when the family can take life slowly. You'll be surprised at what a difference even one day makes.

Because having to go faster is sometimes a fact of life, there are also tips for 'happy hurrying' at the end of the chapter. At other times, we parents have to remember to slow down and enjoy the gentle, quiet rhythm of the day, so we can give this gift to our children. Let's take a deep breath...

## Healthy Rhythms – Breathing In and Out

Think of the day as a series of in-and-out breaths. We fill our days with activities; some of these are classed as breathing-in activities, involving slowing-down periods and quiet play at home, being peaceful. Children need time to connect and re-centre during the day. This might be done with a meal or snack, indoor imaginative play, quietly helping with chores, a rest time in a comfortable area, stories on the couch or big bed, a cuddle on the knee with songs, or a shared peaceful bath. Breathing-in activities allow us to connect, slow down and look into each other's eyes. Breathing-out activities are more active: outings, social gatherings, big and noisy play, outside play, perhaps more structured activities inside and outside the home.

If children's play and behaviour becomes disruptive or loses its momentum, offer an in-breath activity. Allow children time to centre again, connect to loved ones and refuel, before sending them back out into the busy world. Imagine this breathing-in-and-out rhythm occurring in your home throughout the day. It can help to give you a sense of a nurturing pattern that is keeping you and the children in sync.

Children who go from one breathing-out activity to the next can become quite demanding for entertainment. 'What are we doing



today?' 'What are we doing next?' 'Where are we going?' You may then hear the words, 'I'm bored', because they are so used to being entertained. Children require quiet spaces in each day to create play from within. They need time to be imaginative, to play quietly, be nurtured and spend rest periods with loved ones.

Out in the morning? Try staying at home in the afternoon, and vice versa. This brings balance to the day. If we have a busy social day out, can we stay at home the next day?

Every family has different work commitments and different quantities of time they can spend at home. Remember, however, that as parents it is we who hold the key for creating positive and balanced rhythms for our children. Children will go, go and go. And then have a meltdown!

Adults also benefit greatly from periods of breathing in. We too easily forget to rest ourselves. Adults have been known to throw tantrums, too, from being too busy. (I know!) Being a constantly busy parent has consequences in family life. When I make unwise parenting choices, I am usually stressed about something else or rushed.

At the end of each day, reflect, 'Did we breathe in today? Can we keep life in balance, to allow our children to be balanced?'

## The Concept of Time

Young children do not understand concepts of time such as one o'clock, ten minutes, two days, Monday or Friday. A child's time zone is NOW. I reassured an anxious child during school playtime that I would be back in five minutes. Her response: 'I don't know what five minutes means!' Young children have an understanding of time that comes from the rhythm of their lives. What can make sense to them is breakfast time, playtime, afternoon nap time, playgroup day, baking day and pancake Sunday. Maintaining a consistent rhythm to their day – and week – helps children feel nurtured, stable and joyous. They are able to enter into each activity with the knowledge that they can have this experience again and again, and they have the pleasure and reassurance of anticipating future routines and events.

Rhythm does not mean rigidity. Rather, it is a chance to

make little moments special. Family rhythms bring wonderful experiences into our days, weeks and years together. It also ensures that we spend time on the things we most value, rather than on what we assume is most pressing. Building a lovely and considered family rhythm means that the weeks do not go by with the thought, 'I meant to do that, but...'

Let us look at an ordinary day and see what moments parents can make extraordinary for their children. Even if we are 'time poor', most of the suggestions below take half a minute or so, and hold priceless gifts for children, gifts of connection, communication and creativity in daily life. They also hold the key to fewer struggles of wills, and maximise positive behaviours during meals, rest and bedtimes.

## Daily Rhythms

### Wake Up, It's a New Day!

How do our children wake up? It is beneficial, where possible, for children to wake up by themselves, once they have had enough sleep – to slowly open their eyes, stretch and yawn before getting up and out into the new day. A positive bedtime rhythm (explained later in this chapter), which assists with getting them to sleep at their bedtime, also helps with them being ready for the day the next morning.

How are we to 'meet' children each day? Step into their shoes, and imagine how you would like to be greeted! Like the rising of the sun, create emotional warmth and bonding to start the day together. When my children were younger, on days with no deadlines to rush out for, I would try to stay in bed, so that my little ones could join me for cuddles and love to start the day.

This is a time of butterfly kisses (tickling with your eye lashes on a soft cheek), cuddles, stories and a chat. Many years later, with school times to meet, I still consciously start the day by saying, 'My beautiful, how are you? How was your sleep?' Or I just say 'My darling' and hold them briefly as we meet in the corridor. Five seconds of touch and a few kind words is a great beginning to the morning. The day may get busier, and we may

not see much of each other, but we have already experienced a moment of connection.

When children are young, try a little song while opening the curtains (add in your child's name and two of her or his friends):

Good morning sun, how are you today?  
It's a new day with lots of time to play.  
I wonder will [Name 1] play with [Name 2] or [Name 3] today?

### Mealtime Magic

The mealtime table is a special place in our homes: a place to enjoy food, yes, but also a place where the family can bond. Family meals are perfect occasions to connect, create and communicate together.

We have lost touch, in our heavily processed fast-food world, with the idea that our food is slowly grown in the Earth, planted by a farmer, helped along by the warmth of the sun and some lovely wet showers. We can bring back that magical gratitude and connection with each other and the Earth at mealtimes, and we can begin when our children are very young.

What is breakfast like at home? When children are young, and if there is time, it can be fun to sit down together and invite the three bears along to share the porridge. Or have a special milk jug for little hands to pour.

For morning or afternoon tea, create a daily fruit and vegetable 'happy face' plate. Cut fruit and vegetables into pieces that can form a picture. Bananas are great for lips, carrot sticks for hair, sliced apples for ears and so on. Try more adventurous pictures together, a train perhaps? This is a fun and creative daily food rhythm to encourage healthy eating. Share the plate together: 'I will eat an eye now!'

At lunchtime, if you are at home together, sit with your child and play a 'thank you' game: 'Thank you to the farmer who grew the wheat that made the bread that I am eating'; 'Thank you to the cow that gave the milk that made the cheese'; 'Thank you to the clouds and showers that watered the fruit that I am eating'. This not only tells children where their food comes from, it helps

them feel part of the larger community and brings gratitude and respect back to the dinner table – valuable qualities we lose in a fast-paced life.

I say this blessing each day at school – it builds a stable and joyous rhythm to daily life:

Earth who gives to us this food,  
Sun who makes it ripe and good,  
Dear Earth, dear Sun, by you we live,  
Our loving thanks to you we give.

If you feel so inspired, have a candle, a candle snuffer and a little vase for flowers on the family dinner table. These simple things make a significant difference. Children can help to cook, set the table and pick the flowers for the vase. Then when the meal is put on the table, the child feels connected to it and to us.

At meals, sit together as a family whenever you can. The family dinner table is truly a time of communication, as well as nourishment. Each family member takes it in turns to say what their favourite part of the day was, and to share daily news, however simple, with each other. Children as young as two can have a turn. My husband is an accountant – he might say that he got a new client. The news doesn't have to be exciting! Be a role model of communication for children to follow: 'Now, let me see, what was my favourite part of the day, what shall I share with you today?'

If directly asked about their day, children may be reluctant to share. However, if adults naturally act as role models, sharing their days first as a game, children are more likely to take their turn. If not, there is always another dinnertime.

By fostering this daily rhythm of chatting at the dinner table (with the TV kept off!) in the vital years, it continues naturally for life. Yes, perhaps we will have teenagers who communicate with more than a grunt! If one parent works late, the at-home parent can sit with the children during their meal and have a light snack, trusting that the family will eat together at the weekend.

To end the meal, the child can blow out the candle, or extinguish it with the snuffer. If you forget, your child will soon remind you: 'The candle, Mummy!' Candles bring a little bit of

magic into children's lives, and such rituals may also keep them sitting at the table for longer! Remember that small children eat regularly – there is a need for breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner in most households. Hungry children are grumpy children. Regular eating and resting helps to create a cheerful day. This means there are many opportunities to eat well and connect together!

If you are out in the day and mealtime cooking is rushed, try cooking double and freezing one meal each time. This can be a lifeline on busy evenings and can calm evening nerves. When my children were young, I would cook in the morning, with their help if interested. This allowed us to be relaxed in the afternoon. Resting the dish through the day added to the taste of the meal!

### A Word from a Dad – Michael

To get on well with kids, cook. I recall an aunty making pikelets with me, and this is a special childhood memory. I made bread dough each week when my daughter was young. We made it look like a smile: two rolls for eyes and a sausage shape for a smiley mouth.

#### *A Suggestion*

The tastebuds of preschoolers can create tension at mealtimes. Try a smorgasbord-style plate in the middle of the table for the whole family (alongside the meal), that has chopped veggie sticks, slices of cheese, nuts and sunflower seeds on it, to add more vegetables and protein to your children's diet. It's fun to pick our own food.

## Relaxing Rest Times

Younger children need a sleep in the afternoon, or, when a little older, a rest. Encouraging a sleep or rest routine helps children's energy levels, health and five o'clock moods! If they say they do not want to rest, lie on your big bed and start reading a story. Pretend to read it to teddy! They will usually be enticed over – they cannot resist. Consistent nurturing and healthy rhythms are vital.

To turn rest time into a happy ritual, maybe have a special sleeping bag just for resting in during the day, a rest-time candle, or a child's sofa where you curl up to have a story with the soft toys? Perhaps fill a special basket with interesting, quiet and calming activities for quieter play – for example, a water bottle filled with water and sparkles can be a mesmerising thing. Buy some new rest-time books, never seen before, and keep them in your special rest-time basket. You could have the basket of toys for quiet play in your bedroom so they can open it while you rest! Perhaps use a timer that rings when rest time is over. A magical den made by throwing a large bed sheet over the kitchen table, and putting cushions and books underneath, cocoons a child for a while. Go in too, and read stories together. Is the weather sunny? Lie together and read under a tree, or watch the leaves dance and find pictures in clouds.

Even when my children went to kindergarten and school, they required some tender loving care at four in the afternoon. This applies to any children coming in from a busy day at kindergarten, preschool or the early school years. As they walked in the door at home, I had a snack ready on the table and I read to them from a chapter book. This short time allowed us all to relax and connect together and helped the rest of the evening go smoothly. But when I came grumbling in the door, and rushed to start chores and to put things away, nerves were often frazzled.

Adults tell me that this point is for them as well: remembering to have a daily rest has enhanced their lives and moods too!

Children who have a nurturing sleep or rest rhythm and healthy regular meals tend to get less niggly and sensitive. Difficult behaviour may often be caused by overtiredness, hunger and dehydration. Also, a lack of connection to loved ones. Resting

and going to sleep can be a very precious time to breathe in, and a sacred bonding time in our relationships. Imagine how we, as children, would most like to be put to bed.

## Bedtimes to Dream About

A healthy going-to-bed rhythm and consistent bedtime are important for childhood development and happiness. To hear fewer 'no's at sleeptime, incorporate fun and nurturing end-of-the-day rituals into family life. Cutting out all electronic stimuli (TV and electronic games) before bed also helps.

Begin the bedtime rhythm each evening in a creative way: young children enjoy getting a ride to the bathroom standing on a parent's feet (facing the parent and holding onto their legs) or a gentle plane trip on Daddy's shoulders. I have even seen a saddle for dads! 'The horse needs to go to the stable!'

Once in the bathroom, teeth brushing can be made inspiring by playing a little imaginative game. I have not yet known a child who does not like 'teethy tales'. All children are basically egocentric; they like to hear about themselves, so tell a tale about the daily adventures of each tooth as it is cleaned! Name the foods, toys and people that your own child will remember: 'This tooth ate [cornflakes/porridge/toast] for breakfast; this tooth played with [toy cars/Sooty the cat/wooden blocks]; this tooth loved to eat [cheese on toast/an apple/pasta] for lunch; this tooth smiled at [Nannie/Sophie/your sister].' This little game makes teeth cleaning fun, and recounting the special parts of the day is a lovely way for children to finish their activities and wind down for bed. If a child has been at kindergarten or nursery, their daily events can be guessed.

I recently received an email from a mum, thanking me for the idea of teethy tales. She told me that each day she called her partner on his way home from work, and filled him in on the events of the day. At teeth cleaning time, their daughter was always amazed. How did Daddy know about her teeth's adventures?

Another teeth cleaning game is to talk as if you are the tooth: 'Don't forget me, I may be at the back, you left me out, boohoo!' This encourages cleaning each tooth properly.



*Giant steps*



*Teethy tales*



*Bedtime connection*



My dentist advised us to clean the children's teeth until they were seven, as young children tend to suck and chew the toothbrush.

Getting from the bathroom to the bedroom can be made fun with a piggyback ride, or marching like the Grand Old Duke of York. Make it enjoyable, but not too stimulating!

### *Something to Try*

Do you need to encourage a boy to go to the toilet as part of the bedtime rhythm? Place a ping-pong ball in the toilet (it will float and not flush away). Now you've turned a boring interruption to his play into an aiming game. Dad can try it too, when no one is looking!

Once in bed, there are many creative ideas to help your young ones move to dreamland. And children will like the same song or routine for nine years; there's no need to keep thinking of new ideas! Say 'goodnight' to three things in the room, followed by a lullaby with nice words, and a soft touch. Remember that young children love to hear their parents sing, regardless of whether we think we can sing or not! Singing yourself is far more powerful and beautiful than playing recorded music. By surrounding our child with our own singing voice and caring touch, we are wrapping them in a sweet blanket of our love. Dads, Elvis Presley is fine – any tune, as long as it's slow and loving. Make this a daily rhythm and see your children go off to sleep with a soft smile! Bedtimes can become a big gift of love for children.

Children tend to enjoy one lullaby in particular. Because he loved trains, my son's favourite was 'Train Whistle Blowing'. He moved to the bedroom after a whistle and toot, toot! My daughter's favourite was 'Moo, Little Cow Moo', because she loves animals. I also told her the bedtime poem called 'Good Night' each night. It can be found in Diana Carey and Judy Large's *Festival, Family and Food* (Hawthorn Press).

No more work and no more play,  
Every toy is put away,  
Ended is the lovely day,  
Then – goodnight!

Drink the milk all white and creamy,  
Have your bath all warm and steamy,  
Close your eyes all tired and dreamy,  
Then – goodnight!

Through the window stars are peeping,  
From their holes the mice [I say ‘possums’!] are creeping,  
Your white bed is soft for sleeping,  
Then – goodnight!

Here is a poem I said to my daughter at bedtime, while drawing the star, sun and moon on her back:

### *Wishing Star*

A star for you to wish on,  
A sun so warm and bright,  
A moon for you to sleep on,  
Happy dreams,  
A kiss goodnight.

My daughter when younger was always quite restless going to bed, and she would get up with any excuse. But she tended to settle much more easily when she had a ride on Daddy’s shoulders to the bathroom, teathy tales, her special bedtime poem and a lullaby while her hair was stroked. One night, when I was in a rush – yes, a hurried life! – I skipped all of her rhythm and just said, ‘Go to sleep, it’s late!’ There was a little voice, ‘Mum, have you not worked out that when you sing to me and stroke my hair, I have sweeter dreams?’ The wisdom of a six year old!

Touch is important: build it into the bedtime rhythm. It has the power to settle difficult or restless behaviour and allows for a deeper connection.

For many years I used a soft, simple tune to sing about those people that love my daughter – including our animals – while stroking her hair and face. What is given to children, they tend to give back out to the world. I once found my daughter in our lounge and she had wrapped our dog in a blanket. She was stroking his head lovingly while sweetly singing the lullaby to him, remembering to mention all the neighbourhood dogs who loved him! The look on the dog's face was one of pure bliss!

During my parenting workshops, parents share their own unique bedtime rhythms. One family asks their children to 'blow out' the light each night, as they turn the switch. (Magic!) Another family play a bedtime game called 'Thank Your Lucky Stars'. I love it! At bedtime, take it in turns to think of something to be thankful for. Feelings of gratitude help with sleep.

Another example of a loving bedtime rhythm that worked well in our house was needed when my sister came to stay with her two children. She had recently split from their father, and the children were very distressed, particularly at bedtime. They did not want to go to or stay in bed. My sister was finding it harder and harder to cope. We worked together and reinvented the bedtime routine, emphasising fun. In the midst of the tears one night, my husband came in brandishing his long Tai Chi sword. 'All who follow me get to hold my sword!' he announced, and off he went, up the stairs, singing 'Oh, the Grand Old Duke of York'. The six-year-old boy was mesmerised and up he went! At the top of the stairs, we all went marching into the bedroom and took it in turns to hold the mighty sword! Next, we held a special big crystal while sharing our favourite part of the day. We listened and laughed at all the daily memories. We learnt a lullaby together. The evening was fun, we all connected and, yes, they were in bed! Years later, the boy still held a crystal at night, and liked lavender oil on his pillow, to help with going to sleep.

A special night light can be left on to help comfort a child and give a little light to the room. I bought each of my children a stained-glass lamp – a turtle and a butterfly. These special lamps create a lovely soft light and can remain with them, if they're not broken, even when they live on their own and put themselves to bed!

When the lead-up is slow and nurturing, it is much easier for

children to wind down and sleep. Watching TV or being highly stimulated can cause behavioural difficulties. Also, many films and electronic games have a scary character, and these can create images that play on a young child's mind and may cause bad dreams. Be conscious of what children are watching and absorbing.

### I'll be Back in Five Minutes

When children are very young, it can work well to stay with them as they fall asleep. When ready, start making this time shorter by saying, 'I'm going to wash up, and then I will be straight back in again.' Always give children the promise of returning and the reassurance of fulfilling the promise. Keep repeating this until they are asleep. 'I'll be back to check on you after I've made a cup of tea.'

#### *Something to Try: Taking it in Turns*

In our house, when our children were younger, their father and I had a rhythm so we could share putting them to bed. Variations on this rhythm would work in any household where there are two adults caring for the children. For two weeks I put our son to bed and my husband put our daughter to bed, then for the next two weeks we swapped. We began this cycle at the new moon and then swapped at the full moon. The children looked out the window to see which moon it was – to know when it was time for a change. This rhythm meant that we got to have one-on-one time with each child. We enjoyed connecting, and feeling their unique way of being. The children enjoyed both parents putting them to bed and became entirely comfortable with either of us in this role. I wrote out the poem and lullaby for my husband to sing to our daughter, which he gallantly did, and she would giggle, loving having her daddy sing.

When they are older and can understand, if they keep calling you back or getting up, say calmly and softly, 'It is Mummy's special time now; it's time for you to be asleep.' Of course, if they are distressed or crying, stay with them and settle them. If they are just calling out or happily getting up, reinforce that at their bedtime they go to sleep and Mummy or Daddy has some time to her or himself.

My son stopped wanting a lullaby when he was about eight years old. He now has an 'I love you' or kind words whispered in his ear, and a kiss – short and sweet. For years my daughter wanted her simple made-up lullaby mentioning everyone who loves her. Once she was older, she would write one thing in her gratitude diary. To end the day, I now like to lie on my daughter's bed and have a chat instead of a lullaby. Your family will find its own bedtime rituals, and adapt them over time.

A daily rhythm of morning greetings, mealtimes, rest times and bedtimes leads to fewer tantrums and meltdowns. It also builds a sense of stability and belonging, turning ordinary everyday moments into opportunities to connect, create and communicate together.

## Great Gratitude

Feeling gratitude floods us with 'the happy hormone': oxytocin. This hormone makes humans feel safe and connected and tells the brain 'everything is alright'.

The two daily gratitude games mentioned above, 'Thank Your Lucky Stars' and the mealtime 'thank you' game, help build gratitude into family life. Gratitude is great for parents too! Feeling good makes us more compassionate and patient parents – at least some of the time!

Being grateful is not ignoring the difficult times; it is recognising what we do have. As parents, we can try building a regular habit of taking a moment to reflect and acknowledge what life has given us – perhaps at night before going to sleep or perhaps when we stop at traffic lights or any other trigger that happens regularly. A practice such as this creates calming hormones and leads to a happier life. We all have something to be grateful for.

### *Real Life Story*

#### Connie and Helen – ‘Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf’

My seven-year-old son still loves hearing the same German lullaby we have sung to him since he was a baby. It’s called ‘Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf’. We snuggle up together in his bed, and although I have to remind him what the words mean (as we tend not to speak German), he loves it so much he doesn’t want it replaced by a new lullaby. It shows how sensitive young children still are at that age.

## Weekly Rhythms: Precious Connection Time

The concept of ‘breathing-in-breathing-out’ works for rhythms in the week, too. The world seems to move so fast! This can have an effect on the connection between parents and their children. Parents have different work commitments and schedules, but can a week include one or two days at home?

A ‘home day’ is when we do not get in a car, but stay at home or in the garden, and in the local neighbourhood. There are no time schedules to adhere to. These slower days can become a sanctuary for parents and children. Time to stay in your pyjamas for longer, set up big imaginary play scenes, bake and wash up together, play in the garden and watch a bug, cuddle in bed for a story at rest time, and enjoy the luxury of bathing together in the afternoon when everyone else is at work and busy. Make the most of this unhurried pace of life. By slowing down on some days, we can really smell the flowers. What a lovely scent!

Does a young child really need so many outings and activities in one week? Imaginative play at home is the ideal activity for a growing child. Less is often more. Look at the overall week

and try to balance going-out days with staying-at-home days. Combine this with good play options, craft and cooking ideas (you will find many in later chapters) and you may start to feel that 'home is where the heart is'.

### What Day is it Today?

Imagine going to your usual weekly yoga class, and finding a sign on the door saying that it was held the day before, or visiting extended family on Sunday, to be told that the rest of the family was coming on Monday. This is how children feel when there is no consistent weekly rhythm in their life: disorientated, and at times confused!

Create a weekly rhythm around enjoyable family activities. This means that special time together does happen: we have prioritised it and made a regular place in our schedules for it. Some examples of activities that might find a place in your weekly routine include:

- \* Baking Day – bake together for the biscuit tin;
- \* Nature Walk Day – pack a little rucksack and walk to the park to see the ducks;
- \* Pancake Day – make pancakes together on a Sunday morning; or
- \* Craft Day – paint, or make a special seasonal craft project (see the craft chapter).

At a workshop I ran where we talked about weekly rhythms, a mum said the rest of her week was so busy, her Fridays at home were essential. She always bakes morning tea with her children, to eat on a picnic blanket at home. They pour peppermint tea ceremoniously from a teapot for everyone to share. What family fun!

My first child loved baking and cooking. He was involved with most meals and once a week he baked by himself (with a little assistance!) for the biscuit tin. My daughter loved craft. Once a week, when she was younger, we would make craft together out of an environmental projects book. At present my children love family games night. The whole family sits down to Uno or plays

a game of table tennis. Another rhythm, now Jayson is fourteen, is that he goes to lunch with Dad every Saturday. Rhythms are important with older children too, to make sure the family tribe remains strong. Look to the child's interests for inspiration. Why not start a new family rhythm and see how it goes...

I always bathed with my children on Saturday morning, while their daddy had a lie-in. On Sunday morning, it was my turn for a lie-in because Daddy made pancakes with the children. This rhythm has been going on for years and when the answer to 'What day is it tomorrow?' is 'Pancake Day!', this has always been met with smiles and laughs.

Here is the pancake recipe – give it a try!

### *Pancakes*

- \* 200 g (7 oz) flour
- \* 500 ml (16 fl oz) milk
- \* pinch of salt
- \* cinnamon
- \* 2 eggs

Combine flour, cinnamon and salt. Make a well and add milk and eggs. Whisk until smooth. Melt a little butter in the frying pan, drop in pancake mix to desired thickness, cook and flip (or turn). Yum!

### Treats in a Weekly Rhythm

Rhythms help avoid tantrums! Rhythms are part of creative discipline and they reduce nagging. It can be helpful to put food you want to limit into a weekly rhythm. Friday is always 'Treat Night' in our house. When children ask for something at the supermarket, I remind them that 'Treat Night' is Friday. If you allow TV, put your guidelines about watching it into a healthy rhythm that you are happy with. Stick to this rhythm: children soon get the message and relax into it.



### *Real Life Story*

#### Elina – Friday Wrestle

My husband has a ‘wrestle’ with our two boys on our bed every Friday night when he comes in from work. This has become a keenly awaited ritual in our family – a sign that the working week is finished and it’s time to let our hair down and enjoy the weekend together as a family. The boys (and Dad) love it!

### Time Outside

‘Nature deficit disorder’ is a growing concern. Make sure children’s daily and weekly rhythms include time in the garden and green, outdoor places. Burn off toddler energy and experience the wonders of nature: double bonus! A child needs to play outside every day. A pre-bed night-time walk with a torch in the garden can be a special activity with Daddy or Mummy.

### Cleaning Day Keeps the Cobwebs Away

I clean on a Saturday and now that my children are older we all help to make the house clean together (most of the time...). By creating a weekly rhythm for cleaning, it gets done on a regular basis, and my children learn life skills too. When children are encouraged to play ‘cleaning chores’ alongside you when young, cleaning together becomes a more natural activity, a team activity, a tribal custom!

## A Soulful and Fun Rhythm for Parents

A weekly outing day does not have to be to a ‘child’ place that is primarily entertaining for children, such as the zoo or a mini-train park. You can also choose places that inspire parents: a botanical garden, a beach, an art gallery, a favourite café. With a little creativity, fun can be had by everyone. To help children enjoy more adult places, I recommend taking a child’s backpack with food and small play items, or bringing dolly or a push-along bike.

Build activities that you personally enjoy into your weekly rhythm, to keep you feeling nourished and energised. Set aside time for swimming or yoga, a bath with aromatherapy oil, an afternoon walk in nature, reading, or a special craft project for those half hours while your children quietly play or sleep.

If you have family nearby, would your child enjoy an afternoon each week with them, while you have time to yourself or with your partner as a couple? A once-a-week date with yourself is a healthy rhythm for maintaining your wellbeing. If you do not have family, maybe you can connect with a friend who has children (children who your child is familiar with and happy to play with)? Perhaps you and your friend can have a regular arrangement to take turns minding each other’s children, so you can each have some time to yourself every week or so.

## Rhythm, Not Rigidity

It is fine if you don’t feel like a walk on Walk Day, or if your children have their afternoon sleep in the pram or car rather than their beds or their special daytime sleep spot once in a while. Go with the flow and follow your intuition and your child’s needs in the moment – and adapt to the weather conditions! This is a wonderful way to live; have a plan and a contingency plan.

Everybody’s daily and weekly rhythms are unique. What feels right for you and your child? If you recognise that you are really busy, can you be conscious about it? Is it working?

Rhythms need to change and adapt to suit different children and different stages in their life. Keep observing your children: what do they need in a rhythm now?

If, in your household, children are with relatives or at childcare while parents work during the week, this doesn't mean there isn't a family rhythm. A lovely morning greeting and evening and bedtime routines help you all to connect at the start and end of the day. The early evenings could also include short activities in a simple weekly rhythm of days for baking, craft or massage. And you can have special meals at the weekend. (Sunday pancakes: yum!)

It is the ordinary moments of every day or week that form the memories of childhood, and get passed on to the next generation.

It is parents who must create the positive rhythms that will build a sense of stability, trust and joy in their children.

Once when I was teaching a class of seven year olds, we had been reading a book about whales. During question and comment time, a child piped up, 'Did you know that young whales really need their parents' attention? If they don't get attention, they will lie on their parent's blow hole so the parent can't breathe!' Wow, what a story!

I reflect that our own children stop us – in other ways! – because they, like young whales, need connection and attention. With a steady weekly rhythm, we can ensure that the attention they need is built in. They do not have to stop us and demand it.

### *Something to Try*

Imagine that you are your child. Sit quietly and shut your eyes. Go through your child's day, or a part of it, in your mind's eye. Imagine the morning greeting, mealtimes, daily activities, rest time and the bedtime routine. How do they feel for your child? Are there changes you might make with your new awareness?

## Happy Hurrying

If you are in a hurry to get out of the door in the mornings, being organised the night before can start a new day the right way up! Choose clothes and place them ready on a bedroom chair. Lay the breakfast table with bowls, cutlery and cereal boxes the night before. Your child could help before bed – playing waiter! How do you feel when staying at a bed and breakfast and the table is laid when you come downstairs? Pack bags and get lunchboxes and drink bottles ready in the evening too. This will help to reduce the morning stress, and allow for morning greetings and breakfast.

Play a fun game of ‘beat the timer’ together as you get dressed. ‘Can we be dressed in five minutes? I bet we can’t!’ If you need to hurry out of the door, pretend that you are moving like cheetahs and not like snails, or flying like a rocket to the car.

## Monthly Meetings

When my children were nine and eleven, we began having family meetings each month. The Chair, who took notes, also chose the treat for the meeting (a bar of chocolate – yum!). We began by celebrating an achievement that month for each person in the family (however simple), and followed with one grumble (only one!) to work on. ‘Dad, can you please put your used teabag in the compost bin, and not leave it on the side of the sink?’ These requests were noted so we could check the next month whether they had led to change. To end, we decided the family outing for the month: perhaps ten-pin bowling? Our children loved these meetings; they were a time to connect and build a tribe – even with the little grumble in the middle!

*Real Life Story*

## Janoel – Home Days

I came to Lou's conscious parenting classes when my son, Khelan, was three. The very first session we had was on the importance of rhythm: a topic I don't think I had ever really considered. One of the first questions Lou asked us was whether we regularly spent a whole day at home. I sat back and thought: we had swimming day, playgroup day, Kindergarten days, library day and so on, but not one day of the week was dedicated to having a day at home. I committed to a home day in that instant, I think.

From then on, we had a day at home every week. Every single member of our family stays in the house or garden – apart from the occasional walk or bike ride. We all do different things. I love cooking and baking, my partner loves building things, we all enjoy the garden, and the kids just love being involved in anything we're doing! Often they'll puddle along beside us in our housework. At other times we'll organise things, like painting, drawing, reading stories or craft work (my son's ball of finger knitting is as big as my head – although rounder!) During the course of that first year of home days, we gave Khelan his own little garden, and it was such a pleasure for him to plant seeds and to watch them grow.

A whole day at home, with no 'Hurry, hurry, come on, let's get into the car' was – and is – a blessing. It switches my mindset so that I think about what I'm doing now – not just trying to get something finished in time to make it to the next activity. Now that Khelan's at school, it is more difficult to have a weekly home day, but we still create them whenever we can. Sometimes we have to say no to another social engagement, just so that we can slow down and take time out to be creative and nourish

ourselves, our home and the environment. And be present for our children.

In Khelan's second year of school, along with a group of other parents, we decided to set up a Slow Day. We planned a few hours of talks, workshops and activities to inspire visitors to have their own regular Slow Day at home. The response from everyone we talked to was – and is – heartwarming: young and old nodded their heads and said, 'Yes! That's what we need!' We had fabulous support from our local traders, local council and the Community Environment Park where the Slow Day was held. Our story was covered in four local papers as well as a major daily newspaper and national radio: people liked the idea. Over six hundred people came along to enjoy the day, and the feeling from them was positive and grateful.

I invite you to commit to your own Slow Day at home – it will enrich you and your family, and make your home and our world a better place!

## Checklist – Rhythms

1. Morning greetings, how does your child's day start – with warmth like the Sun?
2. Sit down together for breakfast and invite the three bears. (A little jug to pour the milk is a winner!)
3. If you'll be in a hurry, get organised with clothes, breakfast items and bags the night before.
4. To steer clear of meltdowns caused by hunger or tiredness, make sure children eat and rest regularly.
5. Invite children to help lay the table, cook the meal and pick some flowers for a vase.
6. Create a fun food rhythm and make a chopped fruit and vegetable plate into a plane, face or train!
7. At family mealtimes, connect with chat about daily news (parents are the role models for this).
8. Buy a candle and snuffer to add magic to meal times.
9. Say a blessing or give thanks before eating (where did the food come from?), to teach gratitude and awareness.
10. Is there time for imaginative play at home today?
11. Can we spend regular time outdoors: it's important for the toddler years – and all years after!

12. Avoid hurried life. Time is a precious gift for children.
13. Remember to keep breathing-in and breathing-out activities in balance during the day.
14. Ensure children have a nurturing rest or sleep in the afternoon.
15. Throw the bed sheet over the kitchen table, rest together and read stories.
16. Make teeth cleaning fun. What did each tooth do today?
17. Sing, stroke and love at bedtime for sweet dreams.
18. Try to make sure your child is getting 11–12 hours sleep at night, and is waking independently.
19. Create a weekly rhythm. Include activities your child enjoys (Baking Day, Bath Day, Park Day, Pancake Day).
20. When children are young, aim to have one or two days at home each week if possible – or more.
21. Allow treats and TV (if your children watch TV) in a predictable rhythm. This helps to avoid and limit tantrums.



## *Chapter Two*

# Yearly Fabulous Festivals

*The festivals are nodal points of the year that unite us with the Spirit of the Universe.*

RUDOLF STEINER

## Celebrating Family Festivals

Annual festivals like birthdays, Christmas and Easter, or your own faith's celebrations, can become a source of happiness and security in the life of a child, and of the whole family. Celebrations create feelings of awe and magic, and the understanding that life is sacred. Yearly family rhythms bring the three 'C's into our homes: communication, creativity and connection. Festivals warm the hearts of children and all those around them, creating strong family bonds.

The festival customs that we celebrate have been passed down for centuries. Have they lost their transformative inner power in modern commercialised society? In *Festivals, Family and Food* (Hawthorn Press), Diana Carey and Judy Large comment:

Some feel that major holidays are also in a commercial domain, with Christmas decorations in the shops so rapidly followed by Easter ones that the themes become superficial and any meaning lost.

Introducing Rudolf Steiner's *The Festivals and their Meaning* (Rudolf Steiner Press), Ann Druitt agrees:

What do the festivals mean to us today? There must be many people who carry around a question like this along with the bags of Christmas shopping, or find it knocking on some back door of the mind as they pass the annual offerings of chocolate eggs piled high on the supermarket shelves. Perhaps we must accept that the time-honoured rituals of the year have lost their once-vigorous social energy and are now declining into habit. Our ancient customs seem to have generated only customers.

This chapter gives simple and inspiring ideas to create joy, connection and family warmth during birthdays, Christmas and other festivals, aiming to honour the spirit of the occasion. To feed children's soul life – and ours too! – enjoy the simple magic and rhythm of these special days and events.

These major festivals are important, but remember that celebration takes place on a daily basis, too. Every daily blessing at the meal table is a thanksgiving. The seasons also hold a soul quality – a magic to be felt and experienced, not necessarily intellectually understood – and we will discuss them further in the next chapter.

## Celebrating Children's Birthdays

Birthdays can enrich, inspire and honour a child's life, not just be about receiving presents. (Although presents, of course, are fun!) A birthday celebrates a unique life. Remember to hold a birthday celebration for everyone in your family, not just children. Please put on that crown, Dad!

### Birthday Verse

The night before your child's birthday, as a loving ritual, you can say this Birthday Verse when you are tucking them in to bed, adding in the appropriate ages for your child:

When I have said my evening prayer,  
And my clothes are folded on the chair,

And [Mummy/Daddy] switches off the light,  
I'll still be [age] years old tonight.  
But from the very break of day,  
Before the children rise and play,  
Before the greenness turns to gold,  
Tomorrow I'll be [birthday age] years old!  
[birthday number] candles on my cake;  
[birthday number] kisses when I wake.

I have written this lovely verse on a card, kept in my special birthday basket, which I use to set up the birthday festivals each year.

## The Birthday Story

Tell your child the magical Birthday Story, if this inspires you. I have heard this story in many formats and joined all the parts I like together. Here is my adapted version:

Once upon a time there lived a little soul. She lived above the stars, and her friends were the Moon, the stars and the Sun. One day the little soul was dancing and playing above the stars, which suddenly parted, and the little soul looked down, at a new and beautiful land. The little soul ran to her guardian angel and said, 'Today I saw a new and beautiful land. May I visit there please?'

The guardian angel replied, 'First you need to wait for three special gifts.' It wasn't long before the little soul received her three gifts. The Sun gave her a warm heart, the stars a bright light to shine all around herself, and the Moon a silver ribbon so that she would always be able to find her way back.

The little soul ran to her guardian angel once again, and said, 'I have received my three special gifts, now may I visit the new and beautiful land?'

Her guardian angel replied, 'Be patient, my child, it is almost your time.'

That night the little soul went to bed, and while she was asleep, she had the most beautiful dream. In the dream she visited the new land, where she saw many faces. She ran up to two special

people, gave them a hug, and said ‘Will you be my Mummy, and will you be my Daddy?’

And they said, ‘Yes, we will!’

The next morning the little soul awoke, ran to her guardian angel once more and told him of her wonderful dream. The guardian angel said, ‘It is now your time.’

The little soul was led to the rainbow bridge, where her guardian angel stopped her. ‘There is one more thing I have to ask of you: your wings, please. You do not need them in this new and beautiful land. I will keep them safe for you, until your return.’ The little soul took off her wings, and then her guardian angel led her by the hand across the rainbow bridge and into the arms of her new parents.

It has been [birthday age] years now since the little soul came to earth. When she arrived the first thing her mum and dad gave her was her name. They called her [your child’s name]. There are many people in this new land who love her: her mummy and daddy, grandpa and grandma, and all her playgroup friends. The stars visit her every night, the Sun keeps her warm every day and sometimes the rainbow pays a visit.

And her guardian angel is always watching over her.

You may have to practice this story a few times, to say it without crying! It reminds us of the preciousness of life and families, of how we chose our parents, and the uniqueness of every child on the earth. It whispers of the wonders and comforts of the spiritual world.

The Birthday Story can be told as a bedtime tale during the week leading up to, or the night before, a birthday. It can be told as a puppet play (using little dolls and play cloths) on the actual day, at the party, or just for your family’s pleasure. This story enriches the lives of children: I think of it as a ‘treasure tale’.

## The Birthday Table

On the eve of a birthday (once you have read the verse!), when your child is in bed, it is lovely to set up a special birthday table. Children love this in the morning. Put a beautifully coloured play cloth on the table, and make a birthday spiral (a circle or spiral of candles –

perhaps tea-lights in glass jars – the same number of candles as your child's new age, include photos of your child with his loved ones, at various ages. Around the table add special crystals, precious things from nature and one large candle from which to light the smaller ones. Now you are set for tomorrow's birthday ceremony!

### *A Suggestion*

Buy a basket from a secondhand shop to hold the birthday celebration cloths, candles, crown, verse and story. This makes it easier to set up the birthday festival for each family member. The festival grows in love and joy over the years. Your children look forward to being honoured for who they are – their birthdays enrich their soul life.

## A Birthday Ceremony

Make a crown out of gold card or felt, or buy a birthday crown and cloak. Your child, adorned with her crown and cloak, lights each candle from the big candle (or, if she is too young, you light the candles). When one candle is lit, each family member tells a little story about the child in her first year, for example, remembering her favourite toy – any funny and loving memories. On to the next candle, which represents the second year in her life. Tell a loving tale from the child's life from one to two years, and so on, until all the candles have been lit and stories told. After the stories, each family member can give the child a special wish.

The unique child has been loved. The journey of a sacred soul to the earth has been honoured. The spiritual foundation has been laid. Now it is time to open the presents! In our house, the birthday person chooses where to go for a special tea: a night to remember.

Parents can set the birthday table up for each other (with the help of their children). Take time to share and celebrate every family member's birthday. Children love to hear tales about their parents. Tell parents' stories in ten-year increments: 'From birth

to ten, Daddy had a dog named Poppy. Poppy was cheeky and ate some of Daddy's clothes!'



*Birthday girl*

## A Time of Reflection

As a mother or father, spend some time in reflection on your child's birthing day. Remember the birth, and think about the loving connection you two have together (well, most of the time!). Recognise that, on a deep level, your two souls choose to be together. Although you may not always see it, you are perfect for each other! It's worth finding time for reflection on your own birthday, too. Perhaps take yourself off somewhere alone,

surrounded by nature, to contemplate who you are as a unique person and what you individually bring to your family and the world. Feel your unique essence in this lifetime and celebrate it.

## Loving words

Each year my favourite part of my birthday is the words in my husband's card. We fill both sides of the card with writing, a great time to express!

Now my son is fourteen, and he no longer looks for hugs, hand-holding or laps to sit on, he does receive a card with our many loving thoughts? Yes, the tradition carries on, and Jayson feels the power of love and words on his birthday.

## Birthday Present Hunt!

My children love the game of 'Present Hunt with Clues'. (And so did I!) This birthday game can be played even before your child can read: you read the clues for your child, who hunts down the presents. For example, a clue, such as 'I love to clean clothes!' is left on the bedside table. At the washing machine the next clue is discovered and so on, until, after five clues or so, the presents are found. As children grow older, the clues can get more difficult. Last year, my son asked to write the clues for his eleven-year-old sister: the family tradition is being passed on!

## Birthday Parties

With today's fast-paced life and commercialised entertainment, it is lovely to have a traditional birthday party. A party at home is a connecting and special time (and it saves money!). A traditional party is full of simple, inspiring pleasures for children. Here are a few pointers to guide you on your way.

A party in our house is a major festival, with the build-up and planning being just as much fun as the party itself. Involve the children in making the invitations, planning the menu, making

paper chains, wrapping the Pass the Parcel, cooking the pizza on the day, making the birthday cake, creating little items for the goody bags and selecting the games. As with Christmas, the build-up to a party can be just as exciting as the day itself, so take four weeks to prepare. Of course, this preparation time consists of much communication, connection and creativity.

### *Invitations*

Be creative and make your own invitations: now is the time to bring out the quality crayon blocks mentioned in this book's craft chapter. Use them to shade rainbows, or use paint to make handprints!

### *Time Length*

One-and-a-half hours in the morning is usually plenty of time for small children. Any longer and all involved get frazzled! Once they are older, the party length can be extended.

### *Goody Bags*

Make goody bags from brown paper bags, which can be drawn on by your child. Have fun decorating calico bags with fabric paints or, if you're feeling adventurous, tie dye. Think of a little craft project to make as party gifts (look through a simple craft book). Include bubbles, crystals, a packet of seeds, packets of natural sweets or small plain chocolate bars.

### *How Many Children?*

I have heard that the rule of thumb is to invite the same number of children as your child's age. This is not always possible – a few more are sometimes needed for party games – but big is often not better, indeed it can be very overwhelming for a little one – and for parents too!



### *Arrival and the Present Game*

Place a circle of cushions on the floor, awaiting little bottoms. Set up a table for presents. A vase of flowers on a coloured cloth will make this table look special. When the guests arrive, the children sit on the cushions and the birthday child sits in the middle, blindfolded. Each child in turn gives their present and says, 'Happy Birthday [birthday child's name]' The birthday child guesses whose voice it is and, while everyone watches, opens the present.

This starts the party off in a calm, fun way. Some children may not want to join in. This is fine, and adults can do it for them. Young children require a model to imitate, so maybe practise the game before the party, with you in the middle, so young children can see how it's played.

An alternative game for receiving the presents is the Matching Card Game. Draw two identical sets of cards showing flowers, boats, cars, suns, rainbows or other simple pictures. Your child can help you to choose, draw or colour the pictures, depending on their age.

Leave one card on top of each cushion, and give the birthday child a basket with the other matching set, and sit them in the middle. The birthday child chooses one of their cards and calls out what's in the picture. The child with the matching card then gives their present to the birthday child. Children love this simple game.

It is wonderful to make the present-giving ceremony a fun and honouring time. Otherwise the paper will be ripped off and discarded in a frenzy of excitement. Either of the games I've suggested starts the party in a respectful and loving way.

Most children are interested in what's behind a present wrapper! Who isn't?

### *Party Games*

With the children already in a circle at the end of the present-giving ceremony, play simple party games. I tend to play the same number of games as the age of the child. Try to avoid competitive ones, especially those which have only one winner. Party games for all ages can be found in the superb book by Anne and Peter Thomas, *The Children's Party Book: For birthdays and other occasions* (Floris Books).

The party games I have played with young children to five years include:

Pass the Parcel: under each wrapper hide the same little treat. Young children love to pass and unwrap, and this keeps out the element of competition. I place a number of wishing stones, crystals or knick-knacks in the middle (or blow-bubble wands or chocolate bars!), for everyone to share.

Children love to sing! In the middle of the circle, place cards with favourite song titles on them. Choose a child to pick a card, which tells everyone what to sing. Popular classics include: 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush', 'Incy Wincy Spider', 'The Wheels on the Bus' and 'Ring A Rosie'.

As your children grow, new games can be added to this circle time:

'Guess Who is Hiding Under the Blanket?' is a fun game, if the children know each other. One child leaves the room, and another child is chosen to hide under a blanket in the middle of the circle. The child out of the room returns. 'Who is now missing?'

'Changes' is also a fun game. A child is chosen to leave the room and change something about her appearance: roll a sock down, take a hair slide out, or unbutton one hole in a top. The children then guess what has changed about her appearance

After a few party games, it is time to eat!

### *Food and Drink*

Party food can be nutritious and fun: homemade pizzas, fruit kebabs, homemade popcorn and mini pancakes, corn chips and vegetable sticks with dips, natural potato chips. Fruit juice with sparkling mineral water is a party treat! Refrain from putting lollies and sweet foods on the table or all the more substantial food will be left behind and a sugar fix will reign! After the savoury food and fruit has been eaten, as a finale, cut and eat the cake.

A homemade birthday cake is fun. Decorate a simple sponge cake. For girls, 'beetroot juice' icing is great. Mix the icing with a little of the juice from a can of beetroot. It will go bright pink, with no artificial colouring! Otherwise, decorate with fresh flowers. For boys make the birthday cake into the number for

their age and keep it plain or cover it in chocolate or white icing. It is easy to have parties free from food colouring and chemicals. It is the candles and the 'blowing out' that children love, and, of course, the singing of 'Happy Birthday to You'!

After the food, a little playtime to run and be free hits the mark. Perhaps offer face painting or craft outside, or hold a treasure hunt for the goody bags. 'Giant's Footsteps' or 'What's the Time, Mr Wolf?' are fun outdoor games to play.

### *A Good Ending!*

Have a clear ending – a thank you and a goodbye with a goody bag – and then the party does not drag on too long. When adults are chatting and tired children are playing, accidents, quarrels and upsets happen, and the energy is lost. Hold the party in a structured, fun way, and say goodbye! Everyone leaves feeling inspired and happy, and not too tired. You can use the telling of the Birthday Story as a nice quiet end.

### *Themed Parties*

A little fancy dress is fun! My husband and I always try to be the entertainment. We have put on a circus, held the guinea pigs and rabbits, and face painted. Our themes have included rabbits, fairies, fishing, planes and the circus! Children do not expect you to be professional entertainers, they just want to have a simple, good time. At a young age they love to see their parents participate. (Teenagers may cringe!) Put on a magician's cloak or be a storyteller, young children are easy to please (this is part of their charm).

### *Sustainable Birthdays and Parties*

Each step of the way, be conscious of the earth. Can you use recycled paper for your invitations? Brown paper or fabric for the goody bags? Recyclable or reusable cups and plates for the food? Fabric (even charity shop pillow cases!) can be used to wrap the

presents. Cloth flags can decorate the room and homemade food has less packaging. Have fun making your birthdays sustainable: a gentle footprint on the earth leads to an inspired way of living.

### *Give it a go!*

Be courageous! Hold a party, especially when your children are young. It saves you a fortune! Keep to a small number of children, a short time, and a structure of fun, non-competitive games. The planning, as well as the party, becomes a creative and connecting experience for the whole family.

Your child's birthday is complete for another year. Woven through the birthday has been magic, joy and love, a time to remember, and something to look forward to, next year...

## A Word from a Dad – Michael

It was my mother's birthday last week. She always fudged answers about her age, so she may have been five years older than we realised. I wish I had celebrated my parents' birthdays when we were younger. I like the idea of a birthday table (and celebration and stories) for the adults in a family too. The message children get to express is, 'I'm glad you are here, Mum and Dad!'

## A Word from Seven-year-old Jayson

Birthday parties at home are fun. I like to prepare for the party. My favourite thing is helping Mum to cook the cake and snacks. I set up the birthday table for my sister.

*Real Life Story*

## Ronja – A Recycled Birthday

We received an invitation for a birthday party for one of my child's friends. This invitation was quite different to the usual party invitations we received. This was to be a birthday that would make a difference to the environment. The invitation stated, 'pre-loved or recycled presents only'. What a fascinating idea! All I would have to do is walk into the toy room or secondhand shop, collect a few toys and wrap them up – in recycled paper, of course! I explained to my three-year-old that he could choose a toy to give away for a 'long, long time!'

I likened the experience to sharing, or taking turns, because we have so many toys. I talked to him about the Earth: how there are millions of toys being thrown out each year around the world, including plastic ones that will stay underground as rubbish for much longer than our lives. It worked: over the course of an hour, great internal learning took place. The end result was he donated a red fire truck to be a present (he had two such toys).

At the party, I noticed immediately the handmade wrapping paper, tied with wool, the stickers, stamps and finger paint galore, and the unique homemade birthday cards that were for one special three-year-old boy. As he unwrapped the gifts, he did not care they were 'pre-loved'. They were his, now, and they were new to him! That is where the glory was.

I will always remember this special recycled birthday party and I hope you do too.

### *Real Life Story*

#### Vicki – A Montessori Birthday

Here is the Montessori way of celebrating a birthday: lay down a piece of fabric and place labels telling the months of the year around the fabric (this is optional), along with pictures of the seasons (also optional). In the middle of the circle is a candle representing the Sun. The birthday child stands up, holding a globe of the Earth, at the month he or she was born, and proceeds to walk around the candle (the Sun). While the child is walking around, sing, ‘The Earth goes around the Sun, [child’s name], the Earth goes around the Sun, and every time it goes around, another year is done.’

The child walks around as many times as he or she has lived on the Earth. Often a list of memories will be recalled for each year of the child’s life.

## Celebrating Christmas

The spirit of Christmas has been lost amongst the presents! Christmas has the potential to be so much more than a commercial extravaganza.

Christmas is a sacred time for those with a Christian belief. It can also be a sacred time for those of other faiths, uncertain faith, or no faith at all. It is an important part of the world calendar and provides a yearly family rhythm; time to share, time to give.

The Christmas celebration does not need to be bound to a specific or excluding religious philosophy: the story of the birth of Jesus is an archetypal spiritual account of goodness and truth. You can share it with young children in a simple and beautiful way. We do not have to be of any particular religion, or a church attendee, to celebrate the birth of the special child who turned into a man with an exceptionally loving heart, and who shared kindness, healing and compassion with all on Earth. On our journey as human beings, these are qualities that are well worth aspiring to!

The birth of Jesus is worth sharing and celebrating, as are the great spiritual stories from many different faiths. I did not tell my young children the whole Jesus story, his life and ending crucifixion, as I felt this was too adult. Children are touched by the wonderful tale of a special child, carried while in the womb by a humble donkey, born in a stable, with animals looking on, and being visited by shepherds and kings alike!

## Christmas Carols

Singing Christmas carols together as a family is uplifting and connecting. Carols are steeped in history. Do you remember your childhood favourites? Buy a simple Christmas carol book, like Miriam Farbey's *The First Noel* (Dorling Kindersley), and sing around the tree together at night. If you are lucky enough to have people who play instruments at your house, a piano or guitar accompaniment sets the scene. Don't think you can't sing – children do not notice! It is your heartfelt intention, not your singing voice, which is important.

## Advent Calendars

It is best to steer clear, where possible, from Advent calendars that create a lust for chocolate (and very cheap chocolate at that!). Chocolate in the morning is not the healthiest way to start the day! We already have one festival of the year dedicated to chocolate (you know, the bunny one). Do we want to dedicate all celebrations to the almighty dark, smooth stuff? It's stimulating to the taste buds, but there are many other ways to enrich the soul!

Purchase a beautiful Advent calendar that can be used each year, or make one for your child. A fabric or wooden one can hold little gifts, and messages of love. A fun family ritual is to tie a line of string across the room, and on it hang 24 numbered brown paper bags in a row. Imagine the excitement of opening a bag each day. A little gift, homemade treat, note or picture is inside.

## Advent Spiral

A wooden Advent spiral contains 24 candles and holders. One extra candle is lit every day of December, until 24 are being lit on Christmas Eve – quite a sight! A little candle-lighting ceremony can take place with a Christmas carol or story each night. This provides a lovely ritual at home for Christmas time.

## The Advent Table

To set up a magical Advent table in your home, think about Christmas in November! Once an Advent table is set up one year, it's easy to re-create the following year. Clear away your seasonal table (we discuss seasonal tables in detail in the next chapter) or use a plain low table. The two coloured cloths you require are red (on the table) and blue (as the hanging backdrop). These are the two colours that Mary is usually shown wearing in depictions of the nativity. The blue represents the spirit world coming down to meet us, and the red is for love. Place four special Advent candles (large candles in holders) on the table.

Now is the time to honour all the kingdoms on the Earth. On the first Sunday of Advent (count back four Sundays from Christmas Day), light one candle and introduce the mineral kingdom to the table. Collect and display special crystals, stones and rocks found by the children around their home and garden. Think of how minerals serve us, including the ones in our mouth and body: teeth and bones!

The second Sunday, the first and second candles are lit, adding the plant kingdom. A vase of flowers, berries or holly picked by children, or a pot plant can be placed on the table. As an adult, show reverence by contemplating and giving thanks to the different elements that make up our planet. The plant kingdom adds beauty, nourishment and the whisperings of spirit to the Earth.

On the third Sunday, light three candles; it is time for the animals to come! The stable can appear – with animals in and around it – waiting for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. The stable can be bought, or made from a cardboard box; it is the love and intent



that is important, not what you spend. Again, contemplate the animal kingdom that shares the Earth alongside us.

On the fourth Sunday, all four candles are now alight, and Mary and Joseph appear. Buy a nativity set, or make felt dolls and animals, or look for a set in a secondhand shop. Maybe there is already a nativity scene in your extended family? Ask around.

Mary can slowly arrive: she can magically start from the other side of the room on her journey to the stable. Each night of the week, Mary, Joseph and the donkey, aided by invisible helpers, mysteriously move closer. On Christmas Eve, they arrive at the stable. The little manger awaits baby Jesus. When younger, my children ran to the table on Christmas morning shouting, 'Baby Jesus is here!' After a month of anticipation, a magical moment has arrived.

A star appears over the stable on Christmas night and the table continues after Christmas Day. On Boxing Day, there is a visit from the shepherds with their sheep! On January 6, the time has come for the kings. The kings can also travel from afar, across the room, as Mary and Joseph did. The table is now complete. The story of the birth of Jesus has been magically woven into the Advent table.

## A Countdown in Stars

Another Advent calendar idea is to use the blue cloth that is the backdrop of the Advent table. On each December morning, your child can place a gold sticky star (the type some teachers use) on the blue cloth. This is simple but stunning, and satisfying for the child. What an amazing sight on Christmas day: 24 stars shining over the Advent table!

## Story Telling

Stories provide enriching moments during the lead-up to Christmas day. Good books include Georg Dreizig's *The Light in the Lantern* (Wynstones Press) and Estelle Bryer and Janni Nicol's *Christmas Stories Together* (Hawthorn Press). These are simple chapter books for older children (age five onwards). They contain a story for each

day of Advent, representing each of the four elements: the mineral, plant, animal and human kingdoms. After the child places a star on the blue backdrop, opens a pocket or window on their calendar, or lights a candle in the spiral for each day of Advent, read a story.

Storybooks that describe the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus and his special visitors add to the wonder of the Advent table. Remember to keep the story of Jesus simple. Bring the same books out each year at this time, and build a magical Christmas rhythm.

In our home, we regard Jesus (along with Buddha, Muhammad, Krishna and others), as a living example of enlightenment. Celebrate the Christmas story because of the simple goodness and inspiration it holds. It enriches our hearts.

## Father Christmas

Father Christmas originates from the legend of Saint Nicholas, a person who loved and was kind to all children. Steer clear of that Father Christmas who is used as an instrument of control: 'Father Christmas only visits good children.' He loves all children! Childhood is a magical and sacred time, requiring respect and celebration.

At our house, we sprinkle oats on the lawn for the reindeers to eat and also sparkle-dust so the reindeers can see the way in the starlight. We leave out a carrot for them, and a glass of milk and a mince pie for Father Christmas. Christmas Eve is a special, unique time for children, and when they do find out he is probably not coming down the chimney – usually they ask around the age of nine – they can be told that the spirit of Saint Nicholas, his love for children, and the sacredness of childhood live on always.

## The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree is evergreen: it is vibrant all year round, and symbolises the ongoing nature of a loving heart and of spirit. You can bring these qualities to mind when looking at and decorating your family tree.

The tree can be decorated in a fun and creative way, and

children love to help. Sew popcorn together on a line of cotton thread (popcorn tinsel!) and make fabric stars, paper chains and clay hangings. Fairy lights, of course, add sparkle!

## Christmas Craft

The gift of giving is sacred; start preparing and making Christmas presents and cards early or the rush may lead you to buy rather than make.

If children's own preparation of little gifts is filled with joy, warmth and love for the recipients, then those children feel enriched in themselves. That, says Brigette Barz in *Festivals with Children* (Floris Books), is the genuine preparation for Christmas.

## *Christmas Cards*

Design your own cards by cutting out a Christmas tree or star shape from a young child's painting (use a cookie cutter as a stencil). Mount this painted shape onto coloured card, and stick gold stars on too, with a special wish.

## *Gingerbread Recipe*

With this gingerbread recipe and star-shaped or Christmas tree-shaped cookie cutters, children can make wonderful gifts. People love to receive a homemade gift from a child.

- \* 125 g (4½ oz) butter (at room temperature)
- \* 100 g (3½ oz) of brown sugar
- \* 120 ml (4 fl oz) of golden syrup
- \* 1 egg (separated)
- \* 375 g (13 oz) plain flour
- \* 1 tbs ground ginger
- \* 1 tsp mixed spice
- \* 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- \* icing sugar to decorate

Preheat oven to 180° C (350° F), and brush two baking trays with melted butter to grease lightly.

Use an electric mixer to beat the butter and sugar in a bowl until pale and creamy. Add the golden syrup and egg yolk and beat until combined. Stir in the flour, ginger, mixed spice and bicarbonate of soda. Turn onto a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth. Press dough into a ball. Cover with plastic wrap and place in the fridge for 30 minutes to rest.

You can use this time to make the icing. Place the egg white in a clean, dry bowl. Use a (washed and dried) electric mixer to beat until soft peaks form. Gradually add the icing sugar and beat until stiff peaks form. Cover with a plate and place in the fridge.

Returning to the biscuits, place the dough between two sheets of baking paper and roll it out until it is about 4 mm ( $\frac{1}{6}$  in) thick. Use Christmas star or tree cutters to create biscuits. Place the biscuits on trays leaving space between them as they will expand while cooking. Repeat with any excess dough.

Bake the biscuits for 10 minutes or until brown. Remove from the oven and transfer to a rack to cool.

The biscuits can be decorated, and bagged or wrapped as gifts.

Or you can create a Christmas tree using different sized star-shaped biscuits. Place the prepared icing in a small piping bag (alternatively, use a little plastic bag with a small hole cut in the corner). Assemble a wonderful tree by placing a large star on the bottom. Put a little icing in the middle to stick a smaller star on top, turning the points to face different directions. Continue to build, using icing to stick, placing small- or medium-sized stars alternately with large stars, and layering up.

What a sight! Children love to assemble this gingerbread tree every Christmas. Make small trees, using tiny and medium biscuits, to give as gifts, or a large biscuit tree for the family to share.

### *More craft ideas using Christmas cookie cutters*

You can use Christmas cookie cutters to cut clay stars and trees out of a fast-drying clay like Das. Put a hole in while the clay is soft, and decorate by pushing on beads before the shapes dry, or by painting them afterwards. Ribbon threaded through

the hole turns your clay shape into a lovely hanging Christmas decoration.

You can also use cookie cutters as templates to draw on felt or on Christmas fabric. Sew two identical shapes together and stuff, then stitch a loop on the top for a soft homemade Christmas decoration!

Baking and crafts are lovely Christmas family activities. The gift of giving, from our own hands!

## An Ethical and Recycled Christmas

We can buy gifts that benefit people in need rather than large corporations. Seek out catalogues of ethical and fair trade gifts. Make Christmas a recycled affair by reusing last year's Christmas cards for new present labels. Buy recycled Christmas wrap, make your own cards or purchase them from a charity outlet. When we go ethical shopping our purchase gives to others around the world: Happy Conscious Christmas!

Secondhand goods can make great Christmas presents for a child. Here is my funny version of a popular Christmas song:

### *The Twelve Days of Christmas (or Twelve Trips to the secondhand Shop!)*

One wooden dolls' house  
Two sandpit saucepans  
Three cotton bedspreads  
Four little teapots  
Five strings of beads  
Six carved bowls  
Seven shiny egg cups  
Eight wicker baskets  
Nine tiny toy cars  
Ten nursery rhyme books  
Eleven crocheted doilies  
Twelve jazzy outfits  
And a lovely (if you're lucky!) rocking horse!

## Three Things List

Each Christmas and birthday, I consider my Three Things list when looking for presents:

1. A game or outside activity
2. A story (for reading fun)
3. A craft activity (to be creative together)

For younger children, include a movement game to play outdoors. Movement fires up children's brain neurons, it gives them exercise and it's fun. Examples of outdoor movement toys and games include: balls, swing ball, chalk for hopscotch, a kite, a pogo stick or a frisbee.

For older children (from seven onwards), a family board game is an excellent gift. Family games nights help build bonds, especially once children have reached an age when winning and losing are not such dramatic events. Families that play together, stay together!

Books are important and special, particularly in our fast-paced and electronic world. They encourage us to snuggle together, connect and imagine. The love of reading is fostered by providing inspiring books for children and reading together every day. Write a personal message to the child in the front cover, with the birthday or Christmas date.

Craft kits provide an activity to do together over the Christmas holidays. Kit ideas include: paper flowers, homemade soap, wooden cars and boats, paper aeroplanes and necklaces. Children's hands and hearts love to create; craft is a powerful and connecting activity, and it's fun!

On Christmas morning we hand out presents from under the tree to each person, and take it in turns to open one gift, thus avoiding a frenzied present opening time, and allowing time for appreciation (in the giving and the receiving).

## Enjoy this Sacred Time

How we feel about Christmas time reflects in our children's experience. Are we busy, stressed and fed-up, or do we hold a feeling of happiness in our heart? Celebrate this festival together,

and stoke the fire of Christmas joy. Watch the embers fly!

The spiritual world is close at Christmas time; it is an opportunity for deep reflection, contemplation, compassion and joy. Instead we may rush from shop to shop. Take the time to celebrate and build the sacredness of this festival throughout the month of December, together. Young children will then carry lifelong inspiring memories in their hearts, of giving, singing and creating at Christmas time. They soon forget which presents they received, but the family memories last forever!

## Easter Ideas

We always left out a rabbit figure and carrot, which of course was seriously nibbled in the morning!

### Hot Cross Bun Recipe

Here is a great hot cross bun recipe for Easter family baking. Children love to knead and watch the dough rise. Even though this takes time, it is a beautiful ritual on a home day during the Easter break.

- \* 300 ml (10½ fl oz) milk
- \* 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- \* 600 g (21 oz) plain flour
- \* 1½ tsp mixed spice
- \* pinch of salt
- \* 50 g (1¾ oz) caster sugar
- \* 40 g (1½ oz) butter
- \* 250 g (8¾ oz) of currants
- \* 2 x 7 g (¼ oz) packets dried yeast

Combine the flour, yeast, sugar, mixed spice, salt and currants in a large bowl.

Melt the butter in a small saucepan, add the milk and heat until lukewarm. Add the warm milk mixture and eggs to the current mixture.

Use a flat-bladed knife to mix it all into a dough, until it is almost coming together. Then use your hands to finally form the dough.

Turn the dough onto a floured surface and knead until smooth (10 minutes).

Place the dough into a lightly oiled bowl, cover with a clean tea towel and set it aside in a warm draft-free place for 1–1½ hours, or until the dough doubles in size.

Punch the dough down to its original size and knead it again on a floured surface. Divide it into twelve evenly-sized balls, place the balls on a greased tray, cover them with a cloth, and set them aside in warm place for 30 minutes, or until they double in size.

Preheat the oven to 190° C (375° F). Make crosses. For the crosses rub together 50 g (1¾ oz) of plain flour and 2 tbs of butter. Add water to make a soft pastry. Roll the pastry between your fingers to make a snake. Lay two lengths over each bun to make a cross.

Bake for 20–25 minutes or until cooked through. Eat warm with butter – yum!

## Easter Egg Hunt

When setting up an Easter egg hunt with mini chocolate eggs, buy a packet of different colours and allocate a colour to each sibling. Or if you are using a single colour of mini eggs, collect them in baskets, and then at the end an adult can share them out. This makes the game equal and fun, without older siblings finding many more eggs on their longer legs!

## Painted Hardboiled Eggs (family faces!)

When I was young, my dad's passion was model aeroplanes. He would use oil paint to create the aeroplane's markings. One Easter, he decided to surprise us in the morning by using this paint to decorate four hard-boiled eggs with our family members' faces. To our surprise we were met with these painted eggs on the breakfast table. What fun it was, each trying to find our own face – especially as Dad is not the greatest artist! This tradition



continues each year, and now happens on my own children's Easter breakfast table. I reflect on my dad's special time of creativity, which cost no money and has been passed down the generations...

This year we dyed our hard-boiled eggs using bowls of boiling water, a tablespoon of vinegar and food colouring, natural dyes can be used too. Mix food colouring to create purple, orange and green as well as the primary colours. Place the egg on a spoon and coat it in the colouring for as long as it takes to turn the desired shade. Leave it to dry on paper. A bowl full of coloured eggs on the dining-room table looks stunning.

### Egg-Cracking Competition

A friend taught me this game, passed down through the generations in her family. On Easter Friday morning, every family member holds a coloured hard-boiled egg in one hand. Tap your egg against someone else's egg. The first one to crack is out, and eats their egg. Which is the winning egg in the family?

This is a fun game to play with older children, when winning and losing is not a tearful but a laughing event!

### Easter String Game

At a recent parenting workshop, one lady shared her Easter family game. Her mother tied a different colour piece of wool for each child from a starting point and made a trail of wool around the house. At the end were that child's eggs! Can you imagine this Easter game through a child's eyes – how much fun! I wish I had played it when my children were young – we could even have taken the wool to the garden and back! Have a go and let me know...

### *Something to Think About*

What do you remember from your own childhood birthdays and Christmas times or special family festivals? How can you enrich these yearly occasions for your child?

## Two Stories of Multi-Cultural Festivals

### Dana – My Jewish Upbringing

The festival I enjoyed as a child was Passover (the Hebrew term is *Pesach*). The whole idea of Passover is to tell the story of the Exodus, when the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt.

A special part of Passover is the Seder, a special meal that is held on the first night of Passover. During the Seder, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is retold, and children are encouraged to get involved by joining in, singing the songs and answering questions. The Seder is critical to Passover because it is about teaching the children their past and ensuring that this important history is passed on from generation to generation.

During the Seder, there are five fun events that stand out for a child.

The youngest child of the family sings the *Ma Nishtana* (translation: ‘what makes tonight different from all other nights’). It is a song based on questions that encourage discussion about the significance of certain symbolic things that are done throughout the meal.

The hiding of the Afikoman ‘dessert’ encourages excitement among children. During the Seder, the leader breaks the middle piece of Matzah (unleavened bread) into two, and sets aside the larger portion as the Afikoman. The Afikoman is hidden somewhere in the house for the children to find, and a prize is offered for finding it. As a child, this was the game I most looked forward to! Even though the Seder is long, the Afikoman managed to keep me awake and alert. And the prize for finding the Afikoman was always very rewarding!

We sang and recited the ten plagues of Egypt, and then traditionally dipped fingers into a glass of red wine for each and every plague. I always loved the singing and participating in the ritual.

Other songs, such as ‘Echad Mi Yodea’ (translation: ‘who knows one’), are fun tunes, with lots of actions and repetition.

Finally, there is the Passover Seder plate: arranged on a plate are six symbolic items that have special significance in the retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Often these foods are only eaten on Passover, so they are something to look forward to. My favourite was always the Charoset, which is a sweet mixture of apples and walnuts, and the hardboiled egg, which we eat with salt water, representing the tears of difficult times, which have been overcome.

## Nira – a Hindu Childhood

In the Hindu tradition, every month there is a festival to honour different gods or different aspects of life, for example, harvest festival. When reflecting on her own childhood, the festival my own mother looked forward to the most was Diwali, the festival of lights. During this festival, we depict knowledge overcoming ignorance or, to put it another way, light overcoming darkness. My mother looked forward to the firecrackers and everybody receiving a new set of clothes. Specific sweet meats and dishes are prepared. My own memories of Diwali are of being scared witless by the noise of crackers, but at night being delighted by the colourful fireworks.

### *Reflection*

We are not aiming for a perfect day. Real parents create real lives, which include times of tears, sibling squabbles and tired parents, even on special days...

## Checklist – Family Festivals

1. Share the Birthday Verse on the eve of your children's birthdays.
2. Tell the Birthday Story to your children.
3. Set up an honouring birthday table: candles, photos and special things!
4. Hold a birthday ceremony (including a crown) at the birthday table. Tell a story for each year, and make a wish.
5. Take time to reflect on your birthday and your children's birthdays.
6. Hold a simple birthday party; have fun preparing for the event together.
7. Bring the 'Christ' back into Christmas, if you are inspired.
8. Sing favourite Christmas carols together, especially if anyone in your family plays an instrument.
9. Set up an Advent table. Celebrate the four kingdoms on the Earth and Jesus' birth.
10. Celebrate the 24 days of December with an Advent spiral, or a backdrop of stars to an Advent table. Be creative!
11. Include inspiring simple Christmas stories in your Advent.
12. Decorate the evergreen tree.
13. Celebrate Father Christmas, keeping the true spirit of Saint Nicholas alive.

14. Help children to make their own cards and small gifts for loved ones.
15. Hold the energy of awe, excitement, reverence and family connections at Christmas time and your child will share these attitudes with you!
16. Make hot cross buns as a yearly Easter ritual, and play the egg hunting 'Easter-String' game.
17. If my dad can paint an egg, with his limited creative ability, so can you!
18. Create a yearly rhythm with your own faith's special days.