

December 2010

DID YOU KNOW . . .

That Christmas is the best and most natural time of all to strengthen your family? As winter nears, we hear reminders every day about flu shots and other health precautions. But what about the emotional and spiritual health of your family? Do you take as much care with immunizing your children against the pressures of the world as you do in protecting their bodies from illness? Just this week, there have been several horrific stories in the news: a teenager who took fellow students hostage in their school, then killed himself in some unknown despair; a grandmother who threw her toddler granddaughter off an overpass to her death; the details of the Smart kidnapping case from years ago. The media is filled with tragic stories of lives in disarray—stories that can and most likely will be repeated in the months to come.

As parents and professionals, how do we combat our societal ills to “immunize” the children we love, especially at such a hectic time of year? The answer is simple and it has been repeated often on this site—communication is the key to building a strong relationship with the children in your life. When we engage in genuine and open communication with children at all stages of their development, we are building the foundation for a solid relationship that will help children and youth weather the turbulent times they face.

For parents, why not take the following challenge this holiday season: see how much quality family time you can build into your activities? As you are decorating your tree, talk about each ornament and where it came from; what it represents in your family’s life or your child’s life. By doing this each year, you are not only reinforcing the family stories that can be handed down through the generations, but you are also giving your child a sense of value, belonging and family support. Many children who fall into depressed states feel they are not loved or that they are alone. When you smile over a baby’s first Christmas ornament or recount how an ornament was made, you instill the feeling of being known and loved in your child.

If you are making Christmas cookies or goodies for the holiday, don’t rush the kids out of the kitchen so you can get done quickly. Instead, take the time to teach them how to bake (and clean up)! Tell them stories about your own childhood or remember a deceased relative who created the recipe. As you wrap gifts, have a contest to see who can be the most creative with wrap or bows and don’t be afraid to get a little silly with tape and bows. A bow on the nose or the top of the head can make the task fun! Tasting the fudge or candy as you are making it gives your child an extra bond with you—ask for an opinion and improve the recipe together. If you are tasked with a lot of holiday shopping for relatives, ask your child to brainstorm ideas with you and even help you shop. Experiencing the contagious joy of giving is a lesson that is best learned as early as possible.

If you are a professional working with children, such as in a school or Faith Formation setting, you are also sharing a sense of being part of a larger family—the family of faith and of the larger community. Create a class project that allows the children to all work together for a common cause and then let them present the finished product to the charity or person, if possible. Talk about the progress toward the goal as you engage them in activities. It could be as simple as making handmade cards for shut-ins or planning a Christmas visit to a nursing home. It could be collecting donations for a mitten tree or for a disaster-ravaged country. Whatever you do, let children know that they are making a positive difference in this world and that each and every contribution is valuable! When children and youth have a sense of value and purpose, they are much less likely to fall into a depression or engage in harmful activities.

Even when children see you getting stressed over all the holiday activities, which can happen, it's good to be honest and tell them that sometimes it's hard to get everything done, but you do it because you love them and because you want to make Christmas special for all your loved ones. It's also wonderful for children to hear that you need their help to make it all happen. Being needed is an excellent self-esteem builder for children of all ages!

Of course, the most important activity during this season is that of celebrating the birth of Christ. Make a special time in your family or class to set up the crèche and talk about the Christmas story. Emphasize that Jesus came here to save each and every one of us, because we are all children of God and loved beyond measure. As you speak to the children in your life, let them know how much they are loved; how proud you are of them; and how important it is to you that they know that you will always be there for them. Nothing is too "bad" or "awful" that they cannot talk to you about it. You watch over them just as God watches over all of us.

Too often, we mistake giving extravagant gifts for genuine signs of affection. Adults think that the more *things* they give to a child, the more the child *must* know that he or she is loved. The reality is that children need to hear they are loved and important to the adults in their lives. Adults do not have to create big moments to show love for a child, but they do have to make the time to actually tell a child that caring or love exists. It is through this repeated communication that children become confident in their value as contributing members of society and most importantly, of God's kingdom. With this confidence comes a stronger sense of self-esteem and a reduced risk of depression, self-harm, or harm to others.

This holiday season, let us share our love of the Christ child with the children in our lives, in big and small ways. If we see children who seem alone or sad, let's reach out as Jesus would have done, to give the child a renewed sense of purpose and value. In doing so, we honor our Savior's love and sacrifice for us, and we may just save a life. I can think of no better gift to give at Christmas time.

Wishing you and yours a blessed and wonder-filled holiday!

Debora Jones