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The December Dilemma: When Your Family Doesn't Celebrate Christmas

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With every single hall decked top to bottom and carols drowning out the sounds of everyday life, December can be a difficult time for families who don't celebrate Christmas. Children may feel left out of the gift-giving hullabaloo and parents may feel pressured to compete. Schools and other activities often include Christmas themed activities, along with a small nod to other holidays.

It's the time of year when well-meaning strangers — from the cashier at the grocery store to folks on the bus— often ask about visits from Santa. This can leave children confused, or forced to serve as public ambassadors for their family's beliefs. These challenges can be stressful, but they can also be opportunities to strengthen your family's cultural and religious identity and to help your children grow into compassionate and understanding adults. The key is *not waiting until December* to deal with December. Talking about your family's values year-round will help ensure that you have a plan for what and how to react when jingle bells start ringing. Remember: December can be a time of light, good cheer, and family togetherness—whether you celebrate Christmas or not.

Did You Know?

- 95 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, according to a 2010 Gallup poll.
- 51 percent of those who do describe the holiday as “strongly religious.”

Tips for Dealing with the December Dilemma

- **Talk with your kids about what they might say** when strangers ask what they want or what they got for Christmas.
- **Speak up for your kids if they feel overwhelmed by Christmas** themes at school and activities.
- **Make your own family December traditions:** volunteering, cooking, hiking, going to the movies.
- **Santa Claus may not be real for your child, but for her young-elementary friends, he might be.** If you think your child might be likely to spill the beans, have a little chat about what it means to preserve the magic for other people.
- **Build a strong identity all year long, focusing on your family, cultural, or religious traditions.** When December comes, don't try to compete, but rather build your own rituals.

- **Make sure everyone is on the same page regarding the holiday season.** Conflicting messages will confuse kids and make them feel less secure in their identity. Kids will have their own input, as well. Talk with them about what's important to your family and use that to decide what and how to celebrate.
- **Share religious and cultural experiences with friends and family as you deem appropriate.** Maybe attending a holiday block party is appropriate for you, but visiting Santa is not. Or, maybe your family would like to experience a Christmas pageant or a candlelight service with a friend, even though that is not your religious tradition. Allow yourself to enjoy the holiday spirit — the lights and treats and good cheer, if you want. [A good way to talk about this with kids is by comparing it to someone else's birthday party:](#) You can celebrate with them and enjoy the fun, even though it's not your special day.
- **In an interfaith family, it's important to acknowledge everyone's memories, traditions, and expectations around the holiday season,** and December, when you're already in the thick of it, is a difficult time to have these conversations. When the holiday season is over, talk about how it felt and how you'd like to handle it next year. Keep talking all year long.
- **It's important to assess and deal with the emotions and stressors that may arise for you during the Christmas season so that you can support your children.** If you feel beset on all sides with unwelcome holiday cheer, find an outlet — a hobby, a friend or counselor — so that any crankiness doesn't spill over into your family life.
- **Respect the religious aspect of Christmas for those who celebrate it.** Educate yourself and your child — in an age-appropriate way — about the religious and cultural symbols you see around you.
- **It's not just December!** The ubiquitous Easter bunny presents another challenge for non-Christian families. [And, no matter what our religious or cultural background, we often encounter people who believe and celebrate differently from us.](#) **Take each opportunity to reinforce your family's culture and identity and understand others'.**

Sources:

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2. Interfaithfamily.com
3. Beliefnet.com