

# Celebrating the Festivals and Seasons in Early Childhood

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Celebrating festivals can often seem overwhelming for the parent of small children. So much time and energy is needed to feed, clothe, teach, supervise and parent a child that it seems, some days, that little time is left for sleep, let alone planning for a festival! However, if we turn our minds to the inner meaning of the festivals and how best to bring this to our children, we will see that celebrating and planning are actually the most natural processes of life and do not take extra effort at all. It is the artificial tokens of modern “celebrations” that take the effort and life out of us and out of the holiday itself. In this article I will talk about the meaning behind celebrations and how this translates into planning and ideas for the upcoming festivals in your life.

## **Rhythm and Harmony/Connecting with Ourselves and Our Temperaments**

Teaching our children about rhythm and harmony is an important part of their spiritual instruction. The true meaning of rhythm and harmony means we must follow the flow of the year and let ourselves be carried by the flow, rather than trying to force control over the natural flow of things around us. Thus, a holiday is not a burden or interruption in our daily life, it is a rhythm of the year that we must naturally follow to stay healthy and balanced. Rudolf Steiner, in his lecture “The Meanings of Festivals” talks about how the rhythm of the seasons (and festivals) help humans learn more about themselves and their own rhythms:

*“Let us recall how the year's course, in its regular sequence through Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, has a spiritual content; how spiritual occurrences, supersensible occurrences, are revealed in what happens in the course of the year just as a man's supersensible soul and supersensible spirit are revealed in what happens in his bodily life between birth and death. Let us reflect how, in what appears outwardly during the year's course, in Winter's snow, Spring's sprouting, waxing life, in Summer's life of blossoming and Autumn's life of ripening and fruiting — how in all this which discloses itself physically to men something spiritual is hidden, something spiritual sustains it. And so let us turn our gaze first to what takes place in this yearly course, from spring to summer and on towards the autumn (including the festivals).”*

Keeping a holiday calendar or marker for a small child is a wonderful way to involve them in these rhythms. In the late winter a bulb can be planted that can be watched until it blooms for Easter, marking the start of the Easter holiday. At Christmas-time an Advent calendar can be created that lets the child participate in the movement towards the holiday. During Ramadan a Ramadan paper-chain could mark each day of the month. On each chain a kind task could be written to be performed on that day. At the end of the month the chain is gone and the celebration of Eid begins!

## Honoring the Sacred

In his lecture on the meaning of festivals Steiner also notices that materialism is increasing in “today's” celebrations – referring to 1905 in Germany! He notes that these materialistic and physical things we use are only useful and meaningful to us if we use them as tools and don't let them control us. He shares the following verse and asks parents and teachers to meditate on the verse:

*Thou moulded it\* to thy service,  
Thou revealest it according to the value of its substance  
In many of thy works.  
Yet it will only bring thee healing,  
When to thee is revealed  
The lofty power of its Spirit.*

\* He is talking about iron here, but this can also be expanded to talk about many substances. He also relates iron to materialism. He says, *“Let us learn to know iron, and equally all other substances, not merely in terms of material value; let us learn to know them in their majestic spirit power! Then there will be human progress once again, progress for the Earth; and that is what we must will, if we want to be man in the true sense of the word.”*

When we celebrate holidays with our young children we can teach them how to use material things in an environmentally responsible and spiritually fulfilling way and as tools, rather than having them control us. Making handmade gifts, doing “gift exchanges” (where people exchange things they already own), using handmade wrapping paper (great place to use all those water-color paintings) and taking time to share material items with those who may not have enough are ways material things can be used in a meaningful way. I've included a lot of handmade crafts that children can make all by themselves in the e-book “Natural Gifts for Kids to Make”.

## Connecting with Nature

Holidays were originally a way for man to connect with nature. So many actions of wo(man) disconnect her/him from nature so holidays are a way to deeply connect her/him with her/his “mother” nature again. Steiner says, *“It was as tokens of this ‘feeling at one’ with Nature and the universe that the great Festivals were inaugurated.”*

To honor this aspect of the holiday we can focus on sharing nature with our children during the festival. Eggs can be decorated by soaking them in herbal tea during Easter and pine trees can be decorated with objects from nature during Christmas. Popcorn strands can be given to the birds as “gifts” during a winter holiday by hanging them on the tree. During the autumn time wreaths can be made from colorful leaves, pine-cones, nuts and berries. The child can be taught, from a young age, that the holiday they are celebrating is deeply connected to the natural world and not to the shopping mall.

### **Taking Time to Celebrate and Be Positive/Appreciating the Gifts in Life**

The festivals are meant to be guaranteed times in life that people can celebrate, feel peace, be positive and enjoy the gifts they have in their life. Holidays are not intended to be exclusive events that only people with enough money to purchase stacks of gifts and miles of holiday lights can enjoy. If you look at pictures of celebrations around the world you will see people smiling and joyful during their celebrations – no matter what clothing they are wearing or what their status in health or life is. Wars have even been known to stop for a moment or be delayed for days in honor of a holiday. This aspect of the holiday should not be ignored. In this way a holiday can be like a cleansing or a detoxification from the pressures and negative energy we may have gathered since the last holiday. And as a healer I have seen how emotional detoxification is just as important as physical detoxification.

Steiner says, *“Throughout the year we fulfill the common tasks and duties of daily life, and at these times of Festival we turn our attention to the links which bind us with eternity. And although daily life is fraught with many a struggle, at these times a feeling awakens within us that above all the strife and turmoil there is peace and harmony.”*

During the holiday the young child should experience this peace and harmony and know that the holidays are a time of joy and not a time of mother or father being stressed about money, presents, decorations or visits to relatives. We must all meditate on what we need to do and what we need to simplify to make this happen in our home. If holidays are hectic we can reflect on ways to simplify. If holidays are expensive we can reflect on ways to cut back and focus on the meaning rather than the expense.

### **Taking Time for Meditation/Inner Work**

In 1905 Steiner said, *“How many people are there to-day who, as they walk through the streets at this season and see all the preparations made for the Christmas Festival, have any clear or profound idea of what it means? How seldom do we find evidence of any clear ideas of this Festival, and even when they exist, how far removed they are from the intentions of those who once inaugurated the great Festivals as tokens of what is eternal and imperishable in the world!”*

In this statement and in the rest of his lecture Steiner portrays a holiday as a “breathing in” activity – an activity in which we come together, we look inward and we reflect. Ideally, this would balance the rest of daily life which tends to be very outward and filled with duties, the social act of going to the office or school and the daily outward interactions people have while socializing and shopping. However, in the modern world the holidays have become yet another “breathing out” activity – one in which all outward activities such as socialization, duties to others, shopping increase.

With a small child one must make sure to take time at each holiday to allow peace and inner reflection. Inward activities such as reading or looking at picture books about the holiday, baking bread, taking a nature walk, creating a meditative craft (such as an orange pomander), decorating a tree, organizing a nature table or simply sitting or resting should be balanced with the outward activities of the day. Above all one must remember that in Waldorf education, as well as in life itself, it is the process that should be emphasized and not the outcome. It is better to spend two hours carefully decorating two dozen cookies rather than spending one hour putting together four quick batches of treats. Putting up the Christmas lights should be as much of a ritual and event as seeing them and wrapping gifts should be done with as much care and joy as opening them is done with. If a parent can start these rituals and focus in early childhood, they will become part of the child's inner being and it will be easier, when they are older, to create more meaningful holiday experiences and resist the pull of the modern materialistic holiday experience.