

Welcome to the special Christmas edition of this month's newsletter. I decided to postpone the *Father's Role in Education* article until next time because Dad has just written the *Art of Enjoying Christmas* which I can't really postpone! I hope nobody minds.

Readers may notice that this issue is a little late. My family and I have been extremely busy recently and the computers have not been free from morning till night! Since April we have been producing a local paper for the Central Brittany area in France. It is in the English language for the growing English-speaking community who live here and you might be interested to see its website, which we are in the process of making and expanding, at www.theobj.com.

In fact, I have borrowed an article from the Christmas edition of this journal, because I think it is in keeping with the theme of this month's Freedom-in-Education newsletter. It is an account of how Christmas used to be in the Breton countryside, told by a lady who is ninety years old.

I can't help thinking that the art of enjoying Christmas is a rather tricky one in this day and age, and I am sure that many families have found this. I know that the magic of the Christmases I had when I was very little wore off surprisingly quickly, and Christmas was suddenly more stressful than it was fun. It took us a long time, in our family, to throw aside some long-standing traditions, and make Christmas into a genuinely enjoyable experience; a time when the house can be decked out in greenery and red ribbons, and we can all do things together, and make delicious biscuits and chocolates which are too rich to be had the rest of the year!

I hope you enjoy reading these articles, and I wish you a very, very happy Christmas indeed!

Wendy

The Art of Enjoying Christmas

The modern approach to the celebration of Christmas encapsulates all the problems that face parents whose only desire is to help their children to have a happy and fulfilled childhood.

Every year we are bombarded by a barrage of commercial glitz, backed up by emotional pressure from family and friends, combining to persuade us that the way to give children a good time at Christmas is to buy them as many presents as possible. At the same time, there is a widespread acknowledgment that, for many people, Christmas is a stressful time of year, which drags families into debt, and which often leaves children feeling disappointed and guilty for having asked for things which they have discovered they did not really want.

Christmas as a Religious Festival

The way in which Christmas is celebrated has little association with the historical origins of the festival, and presents similar challenges to all families, no matter what their religious beliefs. If a family tries to opt out of the commercial aspect of Christmas, they run the risk of making their children feel different from everyone else. A child cannot be expected to cope with seeing all their friends and relatives being given new toys on Christmas day, and to have nothing themselves: it is hard to imagine anything more likely to alienate a child from their parents' lifestyle or religious beliefs. On the other hand, to simply do the same as everyone else seems to be the worst form of abdication of responsibility as a parent.

Presents

At the heart of the problem is the little acknowledged fact that children cannot cope with the idea of being given presents: a surprise present, given spontaneously and unexpectedly, rarely causes problems, often the smaller the item the better – it is the giving and the receiving which makes it fun. Predictability in presents is also a well-established and successful tradition: at one time,

children knew that they would receive a treat, such as an orange or a tangerine at Christmas. They knew what to expect and the anticipation was fun.

The problem with our current custom is that children are encouraged to decide what they would like to receive and then to expect that they will get it for Christmas. Excitement builds to a fever pitch, and inevitably, few, if any, presents succeed in living up to expectation, making Christmas an anti-climax.

Christmas Past & Present

Traditional aspects of Christmas, such as a day off work, a family doing things together, preparing a special meal, and family members exchanging simple gifts make up a recipe for an enjoyable and relaxing day.

"One thing that adverts never say is that the thing that children enjoy most is being with their parents."

The disruptive influence which has entered into the world of Christmas, and to some extent taken it over, is commercialism. Shopkeepers and manufacturers have seen Christmas as a marketing opportunity for at least a hundred years, but the process of promoting things directly to children has only really been possible for the past four or five decades, since they have started watching more and more television. So successful has this marketing been that there are now large sections of industry which are dependent on the Christmas trade for their survival.

An argument could perhaps be made to justify Christmas advertising aimed at adults, but it is hard to imagine anything less defensible than advertising aimed at children.

Advertising to children is effective because children believe what they are told: they do not imagine that the adult world would deliberately lie to them, so when they see an advertisement telling them that they should get a particular toy, they believe it. This form of advertising is designed to exploit a child's innocence; to make them think that they want something which they don't really want, and to put pressure on their parents to buy something which really has little value.

Eventually, children become wise to the fact that advertisements are not telling them the truth, and they start to become a little more cynical, and difficult to sell to. This results in manufacturers competing with each other to sell to younger and younger children, each one trying to catch the child at that magic moment when they still believe what they are being told.

Most parents have the opposite agenda – they would like their children to retain their innocence and their respect for other people as long as possible. It is ironic that a society which talks so much about children's rights, should leave parents almost unaided in trying to deal with the threat posed to their children's well-being by remorseless advertising.

Growing Up

A child's first Christmas ought to be, and almost always is, an experience of simple pleasure for all concerned. They may have been bought lots of presents, but they tend to show more interest in the packaging than in the toys themselves, and are, in general, the life and soul of the party.

A child's second or third Christmas is often when they experience genuine surprise and delight at receiving gifts which they did not expect. After this things tend to become progressively more difficult. Each year parents buy more and more elaborate presents in an attempt to make Christmas more exciting than the year before, and children try harder and harder to enjoy themselves and to be properly grateful for the efforts that their parents have made, but basically are left with a sense of disappointment and unfulfilled expectations.

Possible Solutions

As hinted at the beginning of the article, dealing with Christmas is not a simple matter: in many ways it encapsulates all the challenges of being a parent at the present time.

The aim must be to give one's children a reasonable collection of modern-looking toys – so that they don't

feel different from other children – but to do so in such a way as to preserve Christmas as a time when you can be together and enjoy simple things in the time-honoured fashion.

One thing that the adverts never say is that the thing that children enjoy most is being with their parents. The ingredients for a good Christmas day might, therefore, be for parents to give their children their full attention, for parents themselves to be feeling happy and relaxed, to have good, home-cooked food, and to develop a tradition of doing the same, simple things every year, such as putting up a Christmas tree and Christmas decorations, making things together, Christmas baking, story telling, reading to each other, and playing games together.

"Christmas is not a simple matter: in many ways it encapsulates all the challenges of being a parent at the present time."

Talking Things Over

Despite one's best intentions, Christmas can still get out of hand as things gradually develop from one year to the next.

Because Christmas is supposed to be enjoyable, no one in a family wants to be the first to say that they are not happy with what is happening. However, like most taboo subjects, things can be made easier for everyone if parents allow children to talk openly about it.

Children do not generally have the same fear as adults of being open about their feelings, and, given a little encouragement, they can often come up with remarkably good ideas about the most appropriate way to celebrate Christmas.

This might sound a little frightening, but, once Christmas is over for the year, children are quite able to work out what was good about it and what was not. They know when they have been duped by a commercial concern, whose only interest in Christmas is to make money, and they can recognise that these money-driven aspects of Christmas generally fail to live up to their hype and tend not to leave one feeling very good.

It should not, therefore, be necessary for parents to have to succumb to a commercial Christmas characterised by expensive but worthless toys, or for them to have to force an alternative version of Christmas on their children. Over the course of time, it should be quite possible to work out a way of celebrating the Christmas festival in a way that really is enjoyable for every member of the family.

Gareth Lewis

Christmas in the Breton Countryside

Marie de Coajou recounts her memories of the Christmas of 1920, translated by Bethan Lewis.

‘On Christmas Eve my father finished work at 3 o’clock. Then, before he did anything else, he fed the animals, giving them twice the usual amount of hay because it was Christmas day tomorrow.

There were four children in those days, later on there were ten of us, all in the same little house – but in 1920 there was my eldest sister, who was 12, then another, who was 9, then me, who was 6, and my little brother, who was 3. Anyway, next our mother mixed the batter for the galettes and we children were told to break up a faggot and keep feeding the fire with wood while she cooked. They were hazel sticks because they make the fire burn clear and bright. The rest of the year we ate crêpes but at Christmas time Mother cooked galettes – they were about ½” thick and had to be cooked a long time before they were ready. They say that a girl is ready to marry when she can cook a galette, so our eldest sister tried her hand at it. I remember that we all sat round and shouted “She can’t turn it – she won’t do it – she can’t turn it –” and when she failed we all laughed and said, “Ah well, she isn’t ready to marry yet.”

In the meantime, Father hung up a bunch of holly over the fireplace and when the galettes were cooked they were placed in a stack on a sort of bread board with wooden slats, covered with a tea towel, and left to keep warm.

We children had been told to take off our clogs and polish them until they were as shiny as front of the fire – all of us, Mother and Father as well – so that Père Noël would find them when he came. The older people were going to walk to hear midnight mass in the village – even though it was four kilometres away, and there were no roads, and no electricity in those days – and Grandmother and an old neighbour who had no children were going to sit by the fire and take care of the house and the little ones till they returned. Our older sister asked if she could go and Father said yes, and began lighting the lamps they were to take with them. There was a hurricane lamp, which burnt paraffin and which usually hung over the door, and a few little lanterns. He also lit some big candles and set them along the mantle piece and on the table. The big Christmas log was put on the fire, and then we went upstairs to bed and the others set off for the village. There were lots of houses along the way – all full of people and children – and by the time they reached the village there were almost fifty of them, walking along with lanterns, and singing Christmas songs. The church was always full, and everyone sang – the same carols as nowadays, but in Breton – then they set off home again.



When my grandmother saw the lamps returning she rang a little bell. That woke us up and we leapt out of bed and put on our best clothes – which we had put out ready – and then we came rushing down from the attic – thump, thump, thump.

We ran to our clogs and we found that Père Noël had been and had left Father a packet of tobacco, and each of us an orange and a little sugar baby Jesus in a clog made of marshmallow – the girls had a pink baby, the boys a white. Oh how happy, how excited we were!

Father told us to put on our clogs, or else our feet would get cold – we had earth floors, don't forget – and said that baby Jesus wouldn't mind: we wanted to eat baby Jesus right away, but Father said no, so we nibbled a little, little bit every day after that – a little bit at a time – but the orange we ate there and then. People in the towns had oranges quite often but we in the country only had them once a year, at Christmas – oh, they tasted so good.

After that we all sat round and ate the galettes; we children ate them with honey – there was always lots of honey in those days – and jam. There was a big, big, yellow bucket of jam at Christmas – 3 kg worth, and there was butter as well.

All night no one had been to see the animals – you mustn't, on Christmas night, because then the animals talk to each other. It's true – once, a long, long, time ago, before I was born, a man didn't believe it, and he went to see them. The horses were talking to each other and when they saw him they said “tomorrow we will take you to the graveyard;” and, you know, that night he died.

We went to visit the animals in the morning, and even though Father had put twice the amount of food in the manger, our white mare had eaten it all! The animals had been awake too, just like us.

The rest of the day we spent visiting our neighbours to drink Christmas coffee. There was no television in those days, so the old people told us stories and sang songs – we children enjoyed it so much. We drank Christmas coffee with all our neighbours – not just on Christmas day but right on till the 31st – Christmas lasted until the beginning of January and we were all so happy and merry.'

Note: A galette is a traditional Breton pancake, made from buckwheat flour.

Letters

Gareth,

I liked your article on discipline. My daughter, who recently decided to home-school (unschool) her two children (grades one and three) informed me of your website about a year ago, and I look at all of your newsletters.

In your article I noticed that you did not reference Alfie Kohn and his books on discipline, competition, rewards etc. You may be aware of his work, and had reasons for not referencing it. However, just in case this is not the situation, I wanted to mention his name (see www.AlfieKohn.org) as I think he is a good source of well substantiated information on these types of educational issues, and his web site has a lot of articles that can be downloaded. Alfie Kohn has certainly changed many of my ideas and resulted in me changing a lot of what I do in my teaching.

Keep up the good work,

Richard Cassidy, Professor Emeritus, Chemistry Department
University of Saskatchewan

Hello Wendy

I would just like to say how wonderful your website is, not just for its articles on home education, but also for your views on History, gardening and cooking etc.
I am nearly 18, and have been home educated for the last two and a half years, but it is only during the last year that I have actually begun to completely let go of school and all the stress and unhappiness it caused!

I adore History, and am devouring every book on English History I spot in the library! It just dumbfounds me that such a narrow portion of history is taught in schools!
I have absolutely no qualifications whatsoever and am just starting to learn to enjoy life for what it purely is: living, and appreciating every moment in it, rather than trying desperately (but with no clear reason why!) to get 10 GCSEs, A levels and University degrees!

Nonny

Many thanks to you all for all your publications.

We have been happily home-learning with our son (aged seven) and daughter (aged nine) since April this year. Both children have so much they want to do each day it is hard to fit it all in. If I plan an activity invariably they have one much better planned already and we go with that. My son now says his favourite subject is English and writes lengthy letters to his old school friends (who write briefly if at all, much to his disappointment). Our daughter wanted more time to read and she now reads for around six hours of the day. She reads very widely, from Tin-Tin to Frances Hodgson Burnett. It made me laugh when the LEA ladies came round and she didn't answer their question because she was too lost in her book.

All of us enjoy the Freedom in Education magazine very much. We like to do the crafts and we are bowled away by the illustrations. Finally, thank you for introducing my daughter to her pen pal. She was told she was weird at school, now she has found someone just like her with a shared love of history, books, and an old-fashioned childhood.

Lorna Morris

Thanks for the magazines. I enjoy them so much! It was your first book One-to-One that really let that heavy stone of uncertainty drop off my heart and let me heave a sigh of relief and escape out into the wide open...

Kati Fitzhenry

Hi my name is Gemma and I'm 10 yr's old,

I think that having a website about homeschool is a great idea because if someone's child is having problems in school then they can think about homeschooling their child or if their child is having a problem understanding their work and are not getting a sufficient attention from their teacher because they are focusing on the silly people in their class then it would be O.K. to homeschool them they would get more attention and therefore learning more and not getting distracted by a class. It would also mean that they would get to spend more time with their Mum or Dad. I also think that its better to stay at home with a parent because 5 Yrs old is too young to start being in a different place with lots of new people especially when they have to do it without their parents. But when you're older it's good to socialise with different people and learn how to get on with everyone.

Hello Wendy,

Just a bit of feedback. This month's newsletter was very well done.
Gareth's comments on discipline were a good read.

We tried the hot cross buns on Bethan's cookbook page sometime ago and they were excellent, the first time we have managed to get them the right texture!

Keep up the good work everybody!

best

Chris Green

News

UK's First Virtual School?

Inter High School is a new school which offers lessons over the internet for home educated children, based in Crickhowell, Powys has commenced recruiting pupils who either cannot or do not wish to attend a traditional comprehensive school.

Lessons will commence in September 2005 using the internet to transmit real time lessons in a virtual classroom for a few hours in the morning, leaving students flexibility to organize the rest of their day. Qualified teachers will deliver the lessons to groups of students in their own homes, enabling students to ask questions as they go, mirroring the normal classroom.

For more information, either visit www.interhigh.co.uk or contact Francis Daniell on 01873 812323 or queries@interhigh.co.uk.

Francis Daniell queries@interhigh.co.uk

If you would like to send a comment, site-suggestion, favourite quote, or news about an upcoming event to be included in next month's newsletter, please [contact](#) me, Wendy.

Quote of the Month

"Rewards and punishment is the lowest form of education."

- Chuang Tsu, 369 BC -

Please send contributions to: wendy@freedom-in-education.co.uk

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