

HOW TO BE A CHILD-FRIENDLY ADULT THIS FESTIVE SEASON

The festive season is a glorious time – Summer holidays, sunshine, presents (for the good ones!), decorations, parties, plus a general feeling of another year coming to the end and the promise of a new year and new opportunities. It is often said Christmas is a time for children, yet it is not unusual to hear some horror stories come out of adults own recollections of Christmas as a child. So let's consider this year how we can make the season more child friendly...

1. JOIN IN THE IMAGINATION AND FANTASY PLAY

Yes, we know some things are not real, and so do children.

But as with other forms of fantasy play, the imagination of children and playful adults comes alive at this time of year, so indulge yourself and play along.

Fantasy play develops a child's imagination. Well developed imagination is critical for effective problem solving and the development of skills essential for innovation and design. When we imagine, we explore possibilities and possibility creates opportunities for developing our skills in thinking differently about challenges.

In short, don't 'diss' the big guy in the red suit - "Santa". Recent adultification of Christmas has newspaper headlines and 'experts' declaring their disdain for such perpetuation of fantasy. Bah humbug!

In reality, these cynical experts are not understanding the deeper context of play. When adults engage in the Santa story they are playing with children, they are creating opportunities for use of the imagination, to encourage reflection on behaviour through the "naughty and nice" scenarios, to experience faith in possibility, and to participate in rituals and traditions in their community that are optimistic and uplifting.

The extensive number of adults who themselves were bought up on a festive season diet of Santa, reindeers and imagination, provides one of the most extensive research samples in the world to study the effects of this fantasy play.

The fact that the majority of the people who have participated in the rituals are healthy functioning adults in charge of governments, schools and organisations in our community

is evidence of there being no significant effect on our community of this practice except we are a little jollier and a little sillier and a lot happier.

The festive season is a wonderful time to don a silly hat and become role models for



playfulness. Feel free to declare your belief in Santa and feel free to become an elf, reindeer, or speculate in those wild "what if" and "I wonder" conversations that engage the imagination of every child at this time of year....

"I wonder if Santa changes his reindeers to kangaroos when he gets to Australia?"

"What if the sleigh breaks down and lands in our backyard?"

Remember – it's the child's fantasy, let them decide the answers...

2. APPRECIATE HEIGHTENED EMOTIONS AND STRESS IMPACT ON CHILDREN

The festive season is a time many events and emotions. Children are sensitive to the heightened emotions of those around them, as well as tired from the excitement of the experiences they are having. Mood contagion is a known condition, and can

result in a person taking on the feeling and emotions of another more dominant person. It makes sense that the adult emotion can easily transfer to the child in these situations, leaving them feeling bewildered and concerned but unable to articulate why. If you or someone you know finds this season to be testing, it is a good idea to simply tell the child about those feelings and reassure the child it is not to do with them.

Reassurance as simple as "Your grandma is sad because she misses your grandpa.

She loves being with us but she has happy memories of Christmas with grandpa, so she misses him especially at this time" can make a great difference to how a child reads and perceives a situation.

3. RESPECT AND SUPPORT A CHILD'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE THE LEVEL OF PHYSICAL INTERACTION THEY HAVE WITH ADULTS

Just because it is the festive season does not mean every adult has the right to kiss or hug a child, or engage in physical contact that is not wanted by the child, or is in some cases inappropriate.

Consider that your attempts to be friendly to a child may illicit the same level of discomfort from them as the drunken reveller approaching you in a bar for a smooch. Yuk!

Stand back, greet the child warmly and ask which would they would prefer a handshake or a hug? And respect their right to choose!

The same rules should apply to the expectations of physical contact and behaviour with a child during the festive season as at any other type of year.

If you see other adults compromising that through inappropriate interactions, behaviours, drunkenness or aggression, it will require your immediate intervention by removing the child from the situation. The older child can be redirected by asking for their help with something, or the younger child through asking to be shown the garden or by drawing their attention away with a toy or the offer of a walk.

Always remember that your gut reaction to situations is a good indicator of when you need to support the child to remove them

from a situation that is uncomfortable or potentially risks their health or safety.

4. REDIRECT AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS

There are some adults that do not demonstrate respectful communications with children. This is often not intentional and not done with malice, they just lack sensitivity. We can take them all on, but the festivities may prevent that being easily done, so practice the behaviour management technique of the art of 'redirection'.

Everything from tactless personal questions, unfavourable comparisons to other family members or friends, or debating whether or not the child has the allergy or condition as diagnosed, can make the season awkward and uncomfortable for children.

"Wow you are a beanstalk now" to a young girl already self-conscious about her height can be embarrassing to them in front of others and make them dread the celebrations. Sensitivity is not everyone's strong point we need to recognise and redirect.

A simple reminder to repeat offenders can help prevent some of this banter around a child's sensitivities. Speak to the person in advance and let them know about the sensitivity.

When a tactless adult does however take aim at a hapless child asking them all manner of weird and wonderful questions, or comments they would never direct at an adult, be prepared!

You know the type of questions and remarks; *"have you kissed a girl yet?"*

or *"ADD – it didn't exist in my day, a good smack is what you need!"*... at this point is your cue to ask a totally unrelated question of the adult, even a question that relates to a scenario they would not recall because you just made it up!

The bewilderment and confusion caused by your question is a perfect foil for the tactless adult and an opportunity for the child to be relieved of the pressure due to their lack of emotional intelligence. I like the standard redirection *"Whatever happened to that neighbour in your street with the loud music?"*. Works every time!

Remember the purpose is to provide any distraction you can give to the adult, to allow the child the chance to have the spotlight removed from them, and don't forget to motion to the child they have an exit plan and to take it!



5. EMPOWER CHILDREN TO BE ACTIVE PARTNERS IN THE CELEBRATION

Whatever celebration you are having, children should be encouraged from a young age to take an active part in it. It is important that children are not seen as observers or the beneficiaries of the celebrations, but as co-contributors and partners. Helping with cooking, making decorations, shopping, helping to wrap presents, and even planning music, are all active roles they can play.

Being assigned roles allows children to feel a sense of shared responsibility for the event. Understanding the traditions

and rituals of their family or community comes from being part of the process, empowering children to have a sense of ownership for the outcomes and respect for the teamwork undertaken to achieve them. We all want children to have a sense of belonging, and it starts with children having an opportunity to contribute.

Wherever you are this summer and whatever you celebrate, may it be a happy 'child friendly' one that will be remembered, not just by yourself, but by the little people whose lives you influence with your priceless gift of respect, understanding and the spirit of playfulness.

Have a great Festive Season!