

DECK THE HALLS WITH MEMORIES AND TRADITIONS

Christmas in our house centers on the children. My husband and I try to create memories and celebrate the religious aspect with our kids instead of focusing on expensive material gifts.

Getting ready

Advent pockets hang over the fireplace. We use them to count the days to Christmas and as a way to get together each night. Tiny pockets hold chocolate coins, Hershey's Kisses and mini candy canes. Occasionally, a Matchbox car or hair ribbons peek out.

The pockets are too small to hold much, so a diminutive card with hand-drawn pictures shows what I might be holding behind my back, such as playing cards, board games, a new hat or mittens.

We make gingerbread houses from graham crackers, decorating them with frosting in zip-top food-storage bags and candy. Last year, we also made gingerbread houses at the Culinary Center of Kansas City. They upstaged our graham cracker creations.

An entire buffet — about 20 feet long — of decorative candy stretched across the room. At home, the houses sit on a white linen tablecloth, surrounded by miniature deer and trees. The proportions are off, but when the cloth is sprinkled with fake snow and cotton balls, it becomes a fanciful tiny town.

Adding to our sugar experience, we make sugar cookies using my husband's great-great-grandmother's recipe: frosting in five colors, a huge variety of sprinkles and mini M&Ms. We sit around the table to frost the cookies. Sprinkles fly through the air — more end up on the floor or eaten than on top of the cookies.

Christmas Eve, the kids get to open one gift, which we make sure is a game. The evening is spent playing the game together with a fire in the hearth while Christmas music plays. It's a wonderful way to pass the evening quickly, anticipating Santa's arrival.

At bedtime

When I was a child, my grandmother made me a small Christmas blanket, claiming it brought special Christmas dreams. I remember going to sleep during the Christmas season with it lying at my feet. A tiny bell on the elf's hat tinkled when I shifted.



Extra-tall tapers (24 inches, to be precise) add height to the mantel. 5B & Co. Candles in Brookside supply locally made Creative Candles as well as its own candles in holiday scents.

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My daughter now sleeps with it. My son has a blanket and pillow with snow skiers. Maybe someday I will make blankets for their children.

All four of us gather at bedtime to read our collection of Christmas books that come down from the attic with the holiday decorations. The kids each have a tiny tree in their rooms. Simply strung with lights and shiny balls — but with lights out at bedtime — the room sparkles as they drift off to sleep.

Adorning the tree

Our tree is not one from design magazines, but one made of memories. One of my favorite holiday events is unwrapping each ornament, remembering where each one came from: ornament exchanges, my first ornaments purchased out of college, 70-year-old ornaments from grandma's tree, handmade treasures of thumbprints and glitter and gifts given with meaning.

Our children's grandmother has started a tradition of giving the grandkids an ornament each year. We express how special this is, as I remember my first Christmas out of college, putting up a tree and realizing that my tree seemed cold. It is only after time that our tree truly seems to be a reflection of the family.

Our tree has millions of lights — or so it seems as I dizzily run lights in circles. It glows with tiny white lights along with a variety of big, colorful vintage C7 and C9 bulbs. I string lights deep into the branches, close to the trunk. This gives depth to the tree and illuminates each ornament. Birds' nest both real and imitation, nestle in branches.

On the mantel

This year, after I pulled out my usual decorations and added a few new things, Becky from Beco Flowers gave the mantel the finishing touch. I had described wispy greenery to her, but as I had was some old, bunched-up garlands. Becky gave the greenery new life as she snipped it all to bits, giving the wispy look I had described. Perfect.

The kids are old enough to expect traditions. I set our mantel differently this year and have already gotten resistance. I desired the simplicity of white, sparkle and fire. The kids said they want their old stockings back. I will probably fold. Traditions trump pretty. Reach Lisa Schmitz, owner of Lisa Schmitz Interior Design in Kansas City, at lisaschmitz@kc.rr.com.