

CONNECT



THE MAGAZINE OF THE FLORIDA PARENT-EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION | VOLUME 35 ISSUE 4

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SUPPORTING YOUR HOMESCHOOLING JOURNEY

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COMFORT & JOY

BY SUZANNE NUNN, FPEA BOARD CHAIR
chairman@fpea.com



The holidays are upon us! I cannot express how excited I have been to get here this year. 2020 has been a year and a half, or so it seems.

We have walked through so many unexpected things during this year, as a nation, as a homeschool community, personally and at FPEA.

The holiday season will bring refreshed feelings of thankfulness and joy in our home as we count our blessings and celebrate all the ways that we have grown as a family this year.

As the holidays are approaching, I know that many of us are experiencing mixed emotions about the things that may look different as we celebrate this year. Many families have experienced the loss of loved ones, loss of businesses, lost opportunities to experience anticipated milestones like graduations or sending their children off to college. Truth be told, there will be differences, still to come, that will have an impact on how we celebrate this year.

Our church pageant has been canceled. Our hometown Christmas parade has been canceled. So we can agree, this holiday season, though much anticipated, may feel different in many ways. For the most part, we have had no control over these decisions – but stay with me here.

This is a year to celebrate like never before!

The holidays bring so much joy to our lives. From all that I have seen and heard, so many people have started to celebrate early – just like my family. Fall decorations were early, and now there are already Christmas music and lights everywhere. For the sake of our families and homes, this makes me ecstatic. The decision to celebrate the holidays well at home is something that we all can have. Seeing how anxious my kids are to engage in every tradition we've ever had has just confirmed how much it has meant for them to enjoy those traditions and spend that time together as family. In this holiday season of 2020, embrace every tradition, sing every carol, watch every Christmas movie, read every Christmas story, and do it with all the joy and wonder that this season truly holds.

The decision to celebrate the holidays well at home is something that we all can have. *Seeing how anxious my kids are to engage in every tradition we've ever had has just confirmed how much it has meant for them to enjoy those traditions and spend that time together as family.*

We've already made a list of all of the things we want to do; and we're checking it twice just to be sure we don't miss a thing.

In this issue of *Connect*, you will find some great ways to spend your holidays, gift ideas and family activities that you will enjoy together. I encourage you to make a list to be sure you don't miss a thing and be sure to take lots of pictures! You want to be able to look back on the 2020 holiday season with fond memories of how you celebrated them well.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

Suzanne



Off the Shelf

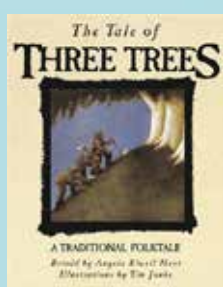
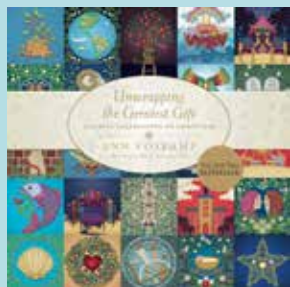
BOOKS OF THE SEASON

BY SUZANNE NUNN,
FPEA CHAIRMAN

This season is filled with the magic and wonder of Christmas in our home! We have found that there is no better way to share the warmth, the meaning, the magic of the holidays than to sit down together and read a book that embraces it all.

I want to share with you the books that touch our hearts, make us smile (and maybe cry), but most importantly, they keep reminding us of the true meaning of family and all that we celebrate as we give thanks and remember what Christmas is all about. These are the books we love to read over again and again during the holidays. I hope that you will be inspired to pick a new treasure to share with your family or that you will just work your way down the list of these great books. Time spent together reading is a priceless gift for any season.

The True Meaning of Christmas



"Unwrapping the Greatest Gift: A Family Celebration of Christmas" by Ann Voskamp

"Cosmic Christmas" by Max Lucado

"The Tale of Three Trees: A Traditional Folktale" by Angela Elwell Hunt

"A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens

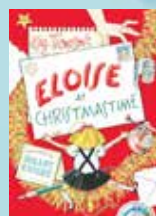
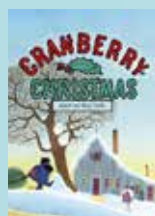
A Touch of Magic

"The Nutcracker" by Allison Jay

"The Night Before Christmas" by Clement C. Moore

"Cranberry Christmas" by Wende and Harry Devlin

"Eloise at Christmastime" by Kay Thompson



Read the Book and Watch the Movie

"A Charlie Brown Christmas"

"Eloise at Christmastime"

"How the Grinch Stole Christmas"

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A festive snowman and a snow-covered forest are among the choices.



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Healthy Kids are Better Learners

2020 has been a year of change, uncertainty, and new normals for all of us. What hasn't changed is how important health and dental insurance is for kids.

With school in full swing – whether it's in person, virtual learning, or homeschooling – we understand educators and parents have a lot more on their plates this year. We want to assure you that we're doing everything we can to continue to be a champion for children's health and to ensure kids receive access to the quality, affordable health and dental insurance they need to be the best learners they can be, no matter what their school year looks like.

New data shows that the pandemic has taken a toll on children's routine health care. Many kids have missed vaccines and other regular health care check-ups amid the coronavirus pandemic out of fear of visiting doctors' offices. What's more, health officials are signaling for the possibility of the flu and COVIDt-19 outbreak in the fall and are urging families to get their flu shots early this season. With Florida KidCare, the state's high-quality, health and dental insurance program, a child's flu shot is completely covered.

Benefits

With children's health top of mind this school year, knowing what benefits are included in your child's health and dental insurance plan is a must. Florida KidCare is designed with kids at the center of its plan and consist of important benefits like vision to ensure they can see the board or small tablet screens when virtual learning. That's why our coverage provides kids from birth to 18 years old with access to the services they need at each age and stage in their development. Health and dental services are delivered through quality plans that offer a choice of local doctors, dentists, specialists, hospitals, pharmacies, and other health care providers.

Benefits include vision and hearing screenings,



doctor visits, immunizations, prescriptions, mental health services and much more.

Estimate Your Cost

As an income-based program, Florida KidCare offers the flexibility other kids' health insurance programs can't. We'll work with you every step of the way, no matter your circumstances. And if you find yourself working less or not at all, we can help you find the program that is the right fit for your family. Many families pay nothing at all or as little as \$15 or \$20 a month. Competitive full-pay options are also available.

For educators and parents, this school year presents challenges unlike years past. But providing health care for kids shouldn't feel challenging. Parents can estimate their monthly payments using our cost calculator tool and apply for free year-round at floridakid-care.org.

Fl  **rida KidCare**
HEALTH AND DENTAL INSURANCE



THE 12 MOVIES

ON OCCASION, I find myself chatting with friends about holiday movie traditions. Sometimes I will discover someone who tells me that they really don't watch Christmas movies. There are those who will explain how much they dislike "sappy" movies ... blah, blah and then there are those who tell tales of busyness and holiday schedules that just don't allow for such things. Our family loves to share a great movie together. When you pair our favorite holiday season with a great movie, well, you've hit our happy place.

We love Christmas movies so much that we start our Christmas movie season in October (yes, I said October). With so many great, feel-good movies to see it keeps us in the holiday spirit the entire Christmas season. With this in mind, you would think it was easy to throw together a list of 12 movies to watch with your family this Christmas. Not the case. I did, however, accomplish the goal of offering some suggestions that bring together old classics that everyone should see and newer classics that should be added to your regular Christmas viewing.

This is not, of course, an exhaustive list but a good jumping off place. If you're a Christmas movie enthusiast like us, I hope you'll find something new to share with your family this holiday season. If you are looking to start a new tradition, these are some real classic, family friendly gems to share.



WHITE CHRISTMAS

Starring iconic actors of the silver screen like Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye and Rosemary Clooney, "White Christmas" brings together music, dance, snow and a heart-warming story that will have your family smiling, laughing and even singing together. Everyone should see this movie at least once in their lifetime.



A CHRISTMAS CAROL (1984)

This screen version of Dickens' classic brings together some of the most famous Scrooge favorites. I love it in almost any form, but in particular is the 1984 version. I grew up with it and watch it with my kids.



THE SANTA CLAUSE

Tim Allen as Santa Claus? Need I say more? This is a funny and heartwarming story of a man who accidentally kills Santa Claus and is destined to now take his place to become the next Santa. My favorite part of this one is that the love for this story continues to grow with some great sequels to add to your viewing pleasure.



RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER

Another classic cartoon that brings a special touch of magic to the holidays. Rudolph, the most unlikely reindeer, saves Christmas with the help of his beautiful, shiny red nose.



ARTHUR CHRISTMAS

With Santa just about ready to retire and pass the business on to his eldest son, he makes a serious mistake and forgets to deliver a child's gift on Christmas Eve. His youngest son, Arthur, however, proves he is the one who has the true heart of Santa when he overcomes every obstacle to get this gift delivered before Christmas dawn.



A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

This classic Christmas movie takes you on a journey of Charlie Brown to the meaning of Christmas with the help of his friends and a tiny Christmas.

OF CHRISTMAS



BY SUZANNE NUNN



MAS CAROL (1938)

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IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946)

This one hits the top of our list! A family favorite and traditionally watched while we decorate our tree. This classic is a special story reminding us to be grateful for the life that we have and just how much we impact the lives of those around us.



CHRISTMAS IN CONNECTICUT (1945)

A single lady makes a living writing magazine articles about her pretend life as a domestic diva. When a recovered wounded soldier, inspired by her heart-warming articles, returns home, he is granted his one wish of joining her for Christmas. We love the original, but there was a 1992 remake of this classic that you may enjoy as well.



HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS (1966)

My all-time favorite Christmas cartoon. The story of the Grinch is a perfect reminder of the true meaning of Christmas. I still watch the original cartoon every year because it is such a classic and I love to hear Boris Karloff as the Grinch. I must say, though, that the 2000 movie version is also one of our favorites every year.



THE BROWN CHRISTMAS (1993)

stmas cartoon
urney with
find the true
stmas with the
s, his dog Snoopy
mas tree.



MIRACLE OF 34TH STREET (1947)

The original classic is the favorite in our house. As a mature and cynical little girl watches her mom help to create the Thanksgiving Day parade, including hiring the perfect Santa, she becomes unlikely friends with this year's Santa pick. With a twist that puts her new friend, Kris Kringle, on trial to prove Santa is real she finds she just might believe herself.



POLAR EXPRESS (2004)

In this animated Christmas Eve adventure, one little boy is reminded about the magic of believing as he visits the North Pole. The wonder of childhood wrapped up in one special night.



MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS (1944)

This classic musical set in the early 1900s follows a year in the life of the Smith family, so not necessarily just a Christmas movie. It is, however, full of non-stop entertainment and great music, including the Christmas favorite, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

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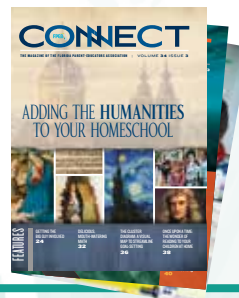
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WILD FLORIDA HOLIDAYS

BY SUZANNE NUNN

I do love the holiday season! All of the lights and decorations, the parties and programs, and I welcome the milder temperatures. Seems like the temperatures have been milder this year, but I'm never surprised at a sunny 85 degrees on Christmas morning either. There have been many years of my Floridian life that a beach trip in December didn't fall out of the realm of possibilities. As a matter of fact, we get so busy during the holidays sometimes that I find myself longing for a day at the beach to just relax and take in the soothing sounds. If this sounds like an enticing thought to you, let me encourage you to give it a try. This is actually the perfect time of year to do some great shelling, explore the natural habitats of our Florida beaches and even see some great coastal holiday décor (shopping anyone?).

I thought it would be fun to offer up a little taste of the Florida we all love during this holiday season. Here you'll find some fun excursion ideas if you are interested in getting out of the house and doing something a little different this season, a recipe for Christmas cookies (Florida style), and other great ways to celebrate Christmas at the beach. See if you can find a little time to enjoy Florida during your holidays.

Give these great recipes a taste and maybe add a new tradition.

KEY LIME SNOWBALLS

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1/4 teaspoon salt (omit if using salted butter)
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons finely grated lime zest
- 2 cups finely chopped pecans
- 2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 16 ounces powdered sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Heat oven to 325°F
2. In a dry skillet, lightly toast pecans on the stove top over medium heat for 2-3 minutes. Be sure not to burn them. Set aside to cool.
3. In a mixing bowl, cream butter and sugar together

until light and fluffy. Mix in vanilla and lime zest.

4. Mix in the pecans and flour until well-combined.
5. Scoop dough into 1 1/2-inch balls, and place an inch apart on ungreased cookie sheet.
6. Bake for 16-17 minutes, or until lightly browned on the bottom of the cookie.
7. While cookies are still warm, roll them in the powdered sugar and set aside to fully cool.
8. When cookies are completely cool, roll again in powdered sugar.
9. Dust with extra powdered sugar and lime zest before serving.
10. Store in airtight container or freeze.

FLORIDA ORANGE CIDER

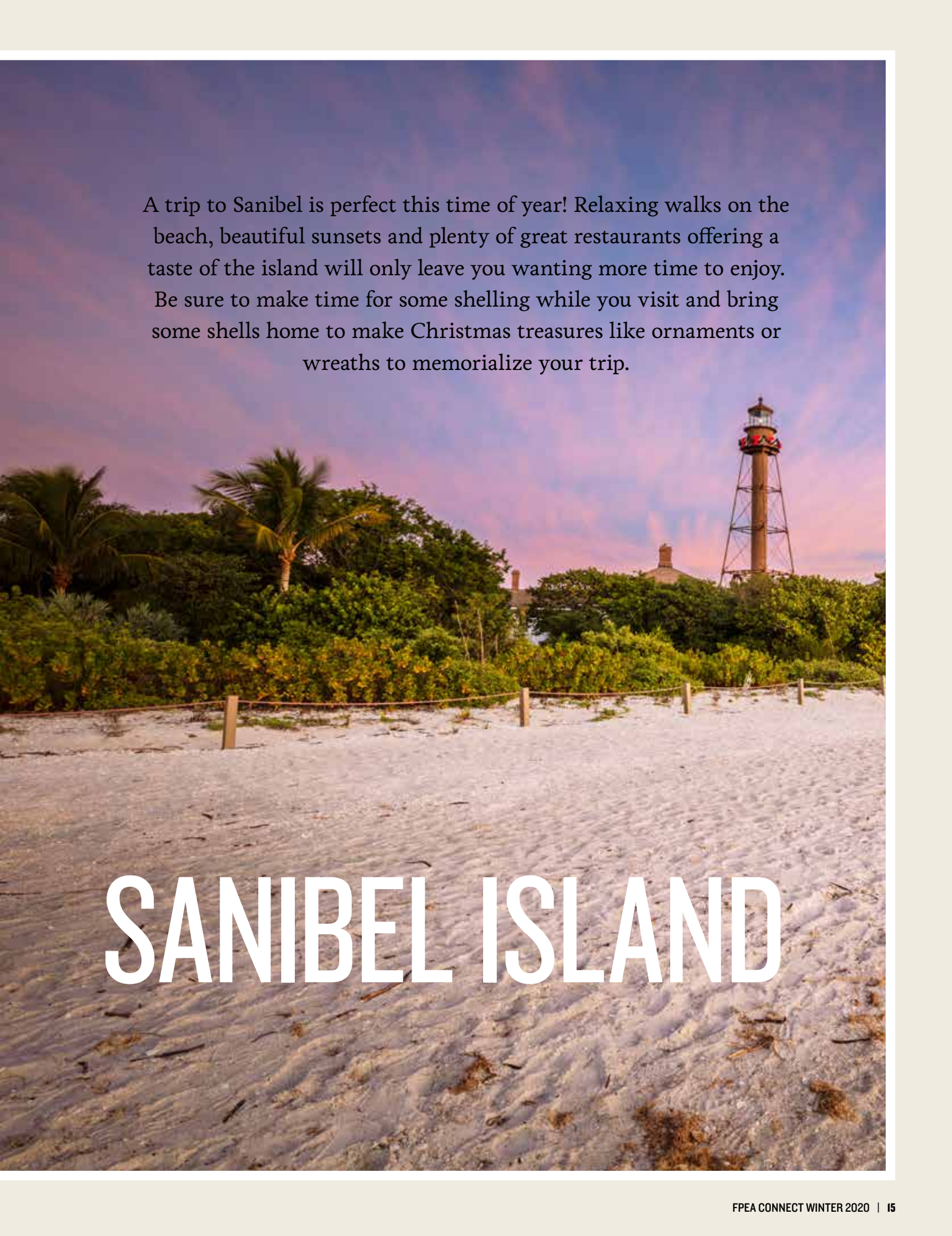
INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups Florida orange juice
- 2 Florida oranges, sliced thin
- 2 tablespoons Florida orange blossom honey
- 1 lemon, sliced thin
- 3 cups apple cider
- 3-5 sticks cinnamon
- 8 whole cloves

PREPARATION

Heat orange juice, apple cider, orange slices, lemon slices, cinnamon sticks and cloves to boiling; reduce heat. Cover and simmer 5 minutes. Remove cloves and cinnamon sticks. Stir in honey and serve warm (with a cinnamon stick for stirring, if desired).

IN THE MOOD FOR A LITTLE HOLIDAY ROAD TRIP? Try one of these excursions.



A trip to Sanibel is perfect this time of year! Relaxing walks on the beach, beautiful sunsets and plenty of great restaurants offering a taste of the island will only leave you wanting more time to enjoy. Be sure to make time for some shelling while you visit and bring some shells home to make Christmas treasures like ornaments or wreaths to memorialize your trip.

SANIBEL ISLAND

SIESTA KEY

Deemed the No. 1 Beach in the U.S., Siesta Key offers a beautiful getaway for the day, or longer, if you so wish. This stunning barrier island off the coast of Sarasota, offers plenty to do for families looking to take in a little beach time during the holidays. Fishing, boating, swimming, parasailing and other adventures await. One of my favorite things to do is sit on the beach in the evening and watch the pelicans as they dive into the water for their supper. Of course, the day isn't complete without a spectacular sunset before heading home.

Explore the beauty of Florida's west coast as you experience the pristine beaches, historic charm and outdoor adventures awaiting in Amelia Island and Fernandina Beach. You will find amazing state parks like Amelia Island State Park, Fort Clinch and others where you can enjoy walking and biking trails that offer plenty of chances to take in Florida's spectacular natural scenery and wildlife. Make sure you set aside time to go horseback riding on the beach. With so many great places to stay and eat, you will not want to miss a chance to enjoy the quaint, historic downtown area. This will be a trip you won't soon forget.

AMELIA ISLAND AND FERNANDINA BEACH

If you find that you can't get away for more than a day, bring a unique taste of Florida to your holiday celebrations at home. We enjoy having a few kitschy Florida decorations and ornaments around (we LOVE the Sunshine State all year long) but why not add a few special items to your holiday menu that will remind you of the culinary treasures in our beautiful state. These key lime snowballs are a cool and refreshing taste of Florida and the Florida orange cider is perfect for those chilly nights when you want to snuggle up and watch a good holiday movie.



DISTRICTS AT WORK

DISTRICT 1

Chipola Home Educators

Chipola Home Educators started the school year off with a Park Day/Parent Discussion event at Madison Park and Splash Pad. Tammy Brookins, the regional FPEA representative for our area, spoke with those in attendance about homeschooling in the state of Florida and the benefits of being a member of FPEA. This was a very helpful event for those in our community who have started homeschooling for one reason or another, as well as an encouragement to those who have been homeschooling for many years.

In spite of all of the group size limitations, we were able to take a trip to Falling Waters State Park in Chipley to enjoy nature, swim, hike and picnic. We have slowly started back with small groups to have monthly play dates for the younger kids; a monthly girls' devotional for middle and high schoolers; monthly spelling bees for different age groups each month; and various contests, such as drawing and photography, for kids of all ages.

DISTRICT 2

Jefferson County Homeschool Association

The newly incorporated Jefferson County Homeschool Association has opened our new resource center.

Our grand opening event was a classic Mom's Night Out that was well attended by moms from Jefferson, Leon and Madison counties. Our guest of honor was homeschool pioneer and lobbyist Brenda Dickinson of the Home Education Foundation.

JCHAF's new facility will be open to all



homeschooling families in north Florida. We have a resource library for curriculum and books, we will have co-op enrichment classes, a robotics program, teen social and service activities, mentoring for new homeschool families and more. For now, we can be reached at (850) 427-1436 if any homeschooler in north Florida needs a place to connect.

DISTRICT 4

Dade Broward Homeschoolers

Keeping the group engaged has been a challenge.

Once parks opened up again, we started our park days but the playgrounds were, and are still, closed. We began doing beach days instead and that worked out great until more rainy days came in.

I contacted many places that we've been for field trips in the past to schedule something as soon as they were willing to open. Many have refused, but so far we've been able to do at least two field trips. Our group is accustomed to monthly field trips, but this is definitely better than nothing.

Some of the students have been hosting their own classes via Zoom. Others are doing small pods or private study groups.

Christian Home Educators Association of Collier County

Like most groups, many of our spring events were cancelled or postponed. By June, we were ready to start meeting again, recommending people wear masks.

We combined our March Project Fair and our April Used Book Sale into one event to make up for lost time. Of course, attendance was low, since some people were still sheltering in place or not ready to attend larger gatherings, but it was a welcome opportunity for those who were ready to start returning to normal.

In July, we held our annual Commencement Ceremony, but it looked a bit different. We normally have the event open for all students to cross the stage as part of a Moving Up ceremony, with special recognition for the seniors. This year, the underclassmen joined the ceremony via Zoom while the seniors attended in person, keeping the seating spaced for social distancing. We had a pick-up point designated earlier in the day where the students could pick up pre-packaged cake to bring home with them so they could celebrate while watching the live-streamed ceremony in their own homes.

By August, we were ready to resume our regular Extra Curricular Expo. Each table was given hand sanitizer and masks were recommended. It was a smaller gathering than normal, but it was still a decent turnout.

DISTRICT 5

Faith at Home

Faith at Home in East Orlando kicked off summer with our annual Curriculum Share events, where moms gather to show and



tell about homeschool materials. We also enjoyed monthly Mom's Nights Out at area restaurants. Our fall kickoff party and first field trip of the year were great.

Hope Homeschoolers

We at Hope Homeschoolers are very blessed to have started to meet in person!

We have had both a very encouraging moms meeting and a fun park day where the kids could connect. Also, we have had several new to homeschooling families join, so we are excited to encourage them on this wonderful journey of homeschooling!

Black Homeschoolers of Central Florida

Our BHCFL Village is a very active and hands-on group. It has taken some creativity to figure out how we will navigate this pandemic and keep our youth learning and growing. So far so good! The month of August turned out to be a great month for us. Thanks to some great community partners, we were able to move forward with the following:

Create our BHCFL exhibit at the Deltona Regional Library for the month of August. We are honored to have been asked by the library to keep up our exhibit for the month of September as well.



The annual Meet and Greet, our first event of the year, was outdoors and socially distanced and a success! With plenty of games, individually packaged lunches and the immersion of culture, we all had a blast. We missed each other so much and there was such a great energy among us.

Each of our families were given a djembe from either Burkino Faso, Senegal or Ghana to take home with them so they could learn and practice African drumming. To make the day even more great, we also participated in a community service project honoring 106-year-old Ms. Venus Tucker.



Our Lending Library was able to update laptop computers, add technological equipment, STEM items and stock up on books

and educational materials to make sure our youth and parents have what they need to be successful in their homeschooling. Our families can check out laptops for the entire school year.

Our youth received class materials ahead of our American Red Cross virtual classes on water safety, fire safety, general preparedness, hurricane preparedness and coping skills. These classes were engaging and kept our youth on their toes.

Our rescheduled Graduation Awards Ceremony and Kings and Queens Dance finally took place. Our youth dressed up in semi-formal and formal attire, receiving certificates from their parents for their academic achievements and gifts from BHCFL rewarding them for a job well done. Pizza, drinks, cupcakes and music filled the room while BHCFL made sure they felt like royalty.

Our youth enjoyed BHCFL's first "Be Our Guest" speaker of the year, artist Zoi Hunter, as she introduced us to her budding career as a commissioned artist.

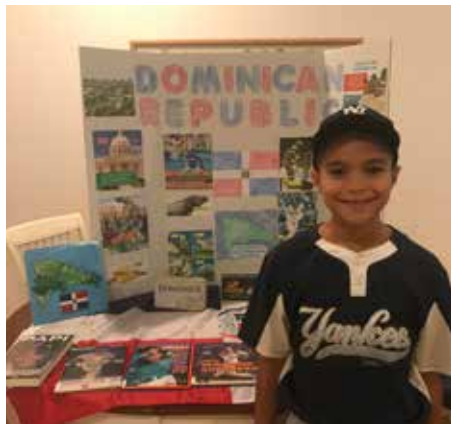
Trinity Homeschool Academy

T.E.A.CH in Tampa began in-person classes on Aug. 10. With temperature checks as the students enter and extra cleaning, things are running smoothly. We've been able to welcome many new families who have decided to homeschool since the pandemic hit. It's super fun to have new faces in the community and our veteran homeschool families have taken them all under their wings.



Calvary Chapel Homeschool Ministry

Calvary Chapel Homeschool Ministry had to adjust activities and canceled many field trips because of COVID-19, but that has not stopped us from achieving our goal of supporting our homeschool families with encouragement and activities.



In August, the Geography Fair could not meet in person, so we had the families send us a video made from their phones of the students presenting their countries and we had judges review them and trophies and ribbons were awarded. Our Mothers of Homeschoolers are meeting twice a month starting in September with experienced homeschool guest speakers giving encouragement to our families.



JOSH

The JOSH group has had challenging times these past few months trying to get together.

- » Most of the time we utilized the wonder of online and Facebook platforms to stay connected.
- » Members have experienced a variety of things since the lockdowns:



- » The celebration of one member's 80-year-old grandma's birthday while standing outside, in the heat, singing "Happy Birthday" through the glass window! (talk about challenging).
- » Back-to-school doctor appointments.
- » Sadly a few of our group members had family members pass away (and NOT COVID-19).
- » Park days and prairie dog sitting.
- » The start of homeschool co-op classes again! Yay!
- » AND, for Rachel Baron, 18, who got to experience her first time voting in the August primary election. Her message is: GO VOTE! Use the freedom we have in this great country of America.

DISTRICT 7

Parents Educating Children

Although delayed due to the coronavirus, PEC was thrilled to finally have our High School Prom and Senior Graduation Ceremony over the summer. The students and the



volunteer staff were equally excited, and these wonderful events were well worth the wait!

Our Support Groups got the new school year rolling by kicking off our monthly Park Day meetings, where parents always find encouragement, information, and fellowship. The teens and kids also get that all-important socialization. Other fun in-person events included our PEC Talent Show, a beach day and a local park playdate.



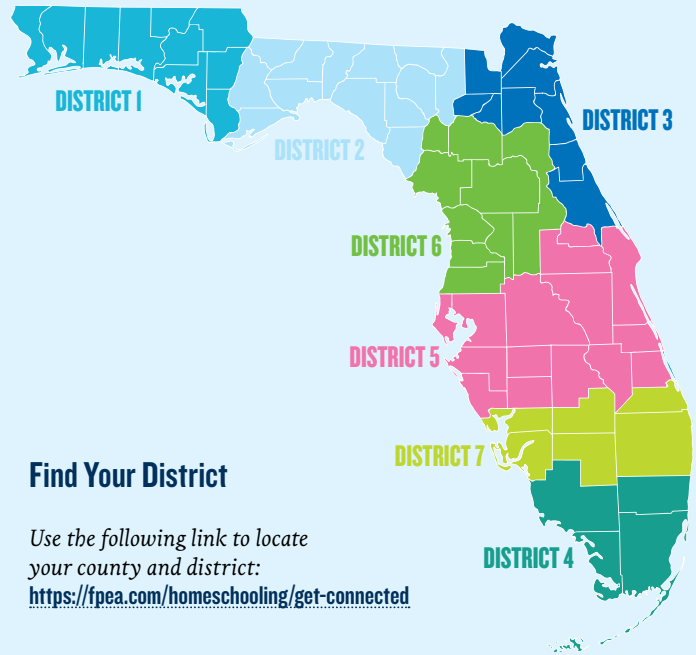
Our virtual clubs are making the most of today's technology: Our Country Fun Geography Club, U.S. Presidents Legos Club, Animal Kingdom Club and even our moms have Moms Coffee Hour.

DO YOU HAVE NEWS TO SHARE ABOUT YOUR HOMESCHOOLING GROUP?

We love to show what our affiliated organizations are doing and the creative ways they work together. For more about how your co-op or support group can get connected with FPEA, email us at office@fpea.com.

FPEA DISTRICTS

The FPEA serves homeschool families by dividing the state into seven districts and assigning a district director to support and encourage homeschoolers in their area. District directors are here to serve you by speaking at your local support group and offering free homeschool orientations at your events or meetings. Please contact your district director about coming to your meetings or events.



Find Your District

Use the following link to locate your county and district:
<https://fpea.com/homeschooling/get-connected>

FPEA DISTRICT REFERENCE

DISTRICT	DIRECTOR	CONTACT
District 1	Currently Vacant	Please contact Larry Wang from District 3
District 2	Currently Vacant	Please contact Larry Wang from District 3
District 3	Director Larry Wang	District3@fpea.com
District 4	Director Tracy Pons	District4@fpea.com
District 5	Director Suzanne Nunn	District5@fpea.com
District 6	Currently Vacant	Please contact Suzanne Nunn from District 5
District 7	Currently Vacant	Please contact Tracy Pons from District 4

FPEA REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

REGION	COUNTY	NAME	EMAIL
Region 1	Okaloosa County	Les and Gina Payton	RegionalRep1@fpea.com
Region 2	Leon	Tammy Brookins	RegionalRep2@fpea.com
Region 2	Madison	Nikki Hunter	RegionalRep2b@fpea.com
Region 5	Hillsborough	Doreen & Mark Jackson	RegionalRep5@fpea.com
Region 5	Orange	Hannah Kartagener	RegionalRep5b@fpea.com
Region 6	Alachua	Crystal Ladwig	RegionalRep6@fpea.com
Region 7	Palm Beach & Broward	Jeanne Castle	RegionalRep7@fpea.com





BY SUZANNE NUNN

SO CHRISTMAS D

Now what do you do?

The turkey was golden, the dressing looked perfect, the cranberry sauce was sliced and placed just so in the special cranberry sauce crystal dish (I honestly thought it was made just for that canned cranberry sauce). All of the side dishes smelled heavenly as they were displayed along the table that was set with the perfect table cloth, cloth napkins, china plates and crystal tea glasses.

There was no screaming, yelling or crying. No drops of sweat marking the beautiful linens, and even my mother had her hair fixed, makeup on and was dressed for dinner. Yes, that pretty much describes holiday dinners when I was growing up. It all seemed so easy in my mother's kitchen.

Then the day came when Christmas dinner was at my house!

The entire family would be there and it wasn't a potluck! I'd never planned a meal for so many people; I'd never cooked a turkey; worst of all, I didn't know what I didn't know about planning this event. This may be where you find yourself this Christmas, so we thought you might could use a few tips on how to make things go smoothly when Christmas dinner is at your house.



1

Plan the Menu

This part is, by far, the most important thing to do early. Make a menu that includes everything: Appetizers, drinks, main course, side dishes and desserts.

Make sure you have every recipe you will need and that you have read through them. You don't want surprises at step No. 8 in your new Pinterest-perfect concoction.

2

Make a Schedule

This schedule should include everything from:

- When you will do your shopping.
- When to clean the house.
- What to prepare ahead.
- When you will begin cooking.
- The order in which dishes will be prepared.
- Setting the table.
- Time for you to get ready for guests.

Even if you aren't normally a planner, take time to plan for this. It will help the day go much more smoothly and you will enjoy it so much more.

3

Plan the Table

- Is this a sit-down meal or buffet-style?
- Will you use silver or plastic? China or paper? Crystal or solo?
- There isn't a wrong choice here, but knowing what you want to do will impact everything else.

I have to take a moment to encourage the fancy. My first Christmas dinner, I didn't have China or crystal and no linens of any kind. There were no tablescape Pinterest boards to inspire my design but I knew I wanted to have real everything. This meant a little extra work in the budgeting and shopping part of the plan. By the time I finished finding what I needed, the fancy paper plates wouldn't have saved me much money and I felt like I'd created a special table to gather round and make memories together.

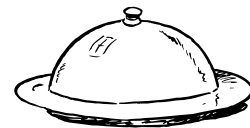
I found incredible deals on dishes and glassware at Walmart. That was then; now, I'd suggest shopping discount stores, like HomeGoods, for great deals to set a beautiful table on a minimal budget. Also, if you have grandma's China, use it! It was intended for special occasions like this.

DINNER IS AT *YOUR* HOUSE?

4

Don't Forget the Serving Dishes!

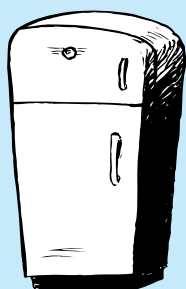
I made a classic blunder with my first Christmas dinner. I didn't have the right dishes to cook in (think multiple casseroles) or serve in. Again, there are so many great options for purchasing inexpensive dishes you can keep for future events but you can also find just about every size you would need in the foil pans in your grocery aisle. *Foil pans are great for cooking in and will work good on a buffet as well.*



5

Make your Shopping List

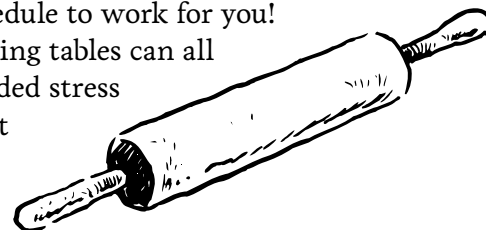
- First, clean out the fridge! You will need somewhere to put the groceries when you come home.
- Take each recipe from your menu and make a shopping list of what you will need.
- Don't forget to consider how many you will be feeding and if you'll need to double a recipe.
- Organize the list to the layout of your store and make sure to have it with you when you shop.
- Don't leave off the items you need that aren't in the recipes, like drinks or snacks for children who may not appreciate your artichoke appetizer.
- Have the list with you and check it off as you go.
- This plan will keep you from making multiple trips to the store or forgetting something really important.



6

Prepare Ahead

Now is the time to put your schedule to work for you! Housecleaning, decorating and setting tables can all be done in advance. No need for added stress the day of your dinner. Recipes that can be made ahead should be made ahead.



7

Make that Schedule Work for You

It's the morning of your big event!

Be calm and work your schedule for cooking and preparing for guests.

If something unexpected pops up, just breathe. I promise it will likely be something you'll laugh at later.

Enjoy It!

Dinner is done, guests have arrived and it's time to enjoy making memories together.

Planning ahead will make it easy for you to relax and enjoy the moment and your guests will think you're hostess skills are impeccable.





GET YOUR PARTY COOKING

This was the most unusual year ever, but one thing that is the same is having a magical holiday season. Hosting the picture perfect holiday gathering starts with great recipes. We've got the best holiday recipes for everything but the main course (we understand if that's a closely guarded family secret) to take your meal from start to finish, including the leftovers. Let's start with the hors d'oeuvres.

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Baked Cranberry Jalapeño Dip

RECIPE IS FROM LAND O' LAKES

- 10 (0.75-oz.) slices of American cheese, chopped into ¼-inch pieces.
 - 1 (8-oz.) package of cream cheese, softened
 - 2 tbs. jarred jalapeño peppers
 - 2 cups frozen cranberries
 - 2 tbs. sugar
1. Heat oven to 350 degrees.
 2. Combine cheeses and jalapeños in a bowl and mix well.
 3. Place cranberries and sugar in a bowl and toss to coat. Gently stir cranberries into cheese mixture.
 4. Spread mixture into a 1-quart casserole dish and bake at 30-35 minutes or until bubbly around the edges.

Zesty Holiday Dip

RECIPE IS FROM HIDDEN VALLEY RANCH

- 16 oz. sour cream
 - 1 packet of ranch dip mix
 - ½ cup diced canned tomatoes with chiles
 - ¾ cup diced red pepper
 - ¼ cup chopped green onions
 - Fresh cilantro to garnish
1. In a large bowl, combine the sour cream, ranch dip mix, tomatoes, bell peppers and green onions.
 2. Spoon dip into a bowl and garnish with cilantro. Serve at room temperature.

Holiday Buffalo Chicken Dip

RECIPE IS FROM MISSION FOODS

- 1 (8-oz.) package of cream cheese, softened
 - 12 oz. white meat chicken, cooked and shredded
 - ¾ cup ranch dressing
 - ½ cup buffalo wing sauce
 - ½ cup mozzarella cheese, shredded
 - ½ cup celery, finely chopped
 - ½ cup blue cheese, crumbled
1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Spread the cream cheese into an ungreased, shallow 1-quart baking dish.
 2. Layer with chicken, celery, wing sauce and ranch dressing. Sprinkle with mozzarella cheese and then blue cheese crumbles. Drizzle with additional wing sauce.
 3. Bake uncovered for 20-25 minutes or until heated through and cheese is melted, then serve.

Baked BLT Dip

RECIPE IS FROM BETTY CROCKER.

- 1 lb. bacon, cooked
 - 1 cup mayonnaise
 - 1 cup sour cream
 - 1 (8-oz.) cream cheese, softened
 - 1 ½ cups 5cheddar cheese
 - 1 tomato, seeded and chopped
 - ¼ cup chopped green onions
1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
 2. Mix mayonnaise, sour cream and cream cheese in a bowl until thoroughly combined. Crumble bacon into the mixture and stir. Add cheddar cheese, green onions and tomato, then mix well. Pour into a shallow dish or pie pan and bake for 20 minutes or until bubbling.

SIDES

Now, let's move on to the sides. The perfectly roasted turkey, glazed ham or shines when paired with glorious sides that will appeal to everyone around the table. Start new traditions with these great recipes.



Orange-Glazed Brussels Sprouts and Butternut Squash

RECIPE IS FROM JENNIE-O.

- 4 slices of turkey bacon
 - 2 tbs. olive oil
 - 4 shallots, quartered
 - 1 small butternut squash, peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes
 - 1 lb. small, fresh Brussels sprouts, quartered
 - 2 garlic cloves, sliced
 - 1 tbs. finely grated orange peel
 - 1 tbs. honey
 - Salt and pepper, to taste
1. Heat a non-stick skillet over medium heat. Cook the bacon for 7 minutes or until desired crispness. Chop set aside.
 2. Add oil to the bacon drippings in the skillet. Add the shallots and squash and cook over medium heat for five minutes, stirring occasionally.
 3. Add 2 tablespoons of water and add Brussels sprouts and garlic to the skillet. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for five minutes or until vegetables are tender.
 4. Stir in bacon, orange peel and honey. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Holiday Beans and Cranberries

RECIPE IS FROM BETTY CROCKER.

- 1 (12-oz.) bag of frozen cut green beans
 - ½ cup dried cranberries
 - 2 tbs. honey
 - 1 tsp. grated orange peel
 - ¼ cup bacon bits
1. Cook beans as directed on the package, then drain.
 2. Stir in the cranberries, honey and orange peel. Top with bacon bits and serve.

Holiday Vegetable Bake

RECIPE IS FROM MCCORMICK.

- 1 (10.75-oz.) can cream of broccoli soup
 - ½ cup milk
 - 1 (16-oz.) package frozen vegetable combination
 - 1½ cups crispy fried onions
1. Heat oven to 375 degrees. Combine soup and milk in a 2-quart baking dish. Stir in the vegetables and 2/3 cup fried onions.
 2. Bake, uncovered for 35 minutes or until hot. Stir.
 3. Sprinkle with a remaining ⅓ cup onions. Bake 3 minutes until onions are golden.



Quick and Easy Stuffing

RECIPE IS FROM SWANSON.

- 1 ¾ cups chicken broth
 - 1 stalk celery, coarsely chopped
 - 1 small onion, coarsely chopped
 - 4 cups herb-seasoned stuffing
1. Heat the broth, celery and onion in a 2-quart saucepan over medium-high heat to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover and cook for 5 minutes or until the vegetables are tender. Remove the saucepan from the heat.
 2. Add the stuffing, mix lightly and serve.

DESSERT

The meal is over, the dishes are piled up and it's time to pull out the sweets. Pies, cakes, cookies and more are definitely the showstopper (and for some the highlight) of any holiday meal. Look no further than these delectable dishes for the perfect ending to a memorable holiday feast.

Classic Pound Cake

RECIPE IS FROM WILTON.

- 2 ¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. salt
- 2 cups butter, softened
- 1 ¾ cups granulated sugar
- 6 eggs

- 1 ½ tsp. vanilla extract
- Cooking spray
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 tbs. milk

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Generously grease the inside of a fluted tube pan and coat with flour.
2. In a medium bowl, stir together flour, baking powder and salt. In a large bowl, beat the butter and sugar with an electric mixer until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add the vanilla and beat until well combined.
3. Add the flour mixture and beat on low speed for 1 minute, scraping the bottom and sides of the bowl as needed. Pour the batter into a prepared pan.
4. Bake for 50-55 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center of the cake comes out clean. Cool in the pan on a cooling grid for 15 minutes. Loosen the sides of the cake and remove from pan, then cool completely on the grid.
5. Whisk together the confectioners' sugar and milk. Drizzle over the cooled cake and serve.

Salty-Sweet Butter Pecan Cookies

RECIPE IS FROM KING ARTHUR FLOUR.

- 1½ cups pecan halves
 - ⅓ cup light brown sugar, packed
 - ⅓ cup granulated sugar
 - 8 tbs. butter
 - ½ cup vegetable shortening
 - ½ tsp. salt
 - ½ tsp. espresso powder
 - 1 tsp. baking soda
 - 2 tsp. vanilla extract
 - ¾ tsp. butterscotch, vanilla or butter rum flavor
 - 1 tsp. vinegar, cider or white
 - 1 large egg
 - 2 cups all-purpose flour
 - 1½ cups butterscotch cookies
 - ⅓ cup granulated sugar, mixed with 1-1¼ tps.. salt, for topping
1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Lightly grease or line two baking sheets.
 2. Place the pecans in a single layer in a pan and toast until they've darkened and smell toasty, about 8-9 minutes. Set them aside to cool, then chop coarsely.
 3. In a large bowl, combine the sugars, butter, shortening, salt, espresso powder, baking soda, vanilla, flavoring and vinegar. Beat until smooth and creamy.
 4. Beat in the egg until smooth. Scrape the bottom and sides of the bowl with a spatula to make sure everything is thoroughly combined.
 5. Mix in the flour, chips and toasted nuts, in that order.
 6. Mix the ⅓ cup sugar and salt in a bowl. Use a spoon to scoop the dough into 1 ½-inch balls, then roll in the sugar mixture to coat. Put the cookies on a prepared baking sheets, leaving 2 inches between the cookies on all sides.
 7. Bake for 10-11 minutes until browned on the edges. Cool on the pan until the cookies have set enough to remove without breaking.

Peppermint Hot Chocolate Slab Pie

RECIPE IS FROM PILLSBURY.

- 1 box refrigerated pie crusts, softened as per the directions on the box
 - 3 ½ cups milk
 - 2 boxes cook and serve chocolate pudding and pie filling mix, do not use instant
 - 1 cup semisweet chocolate chips
 - 1/8 tsp. peppermint extract
 - 1 (8-oz.) container whipped topping
 - 1 (7-oz.) jar marshmallow crème
 - ¼ cup crushed peppermint candies
1. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Remove pie crusts from pouches and, on a lightly floured surface, unroll and stack crusts one on top of the other. Roll to a 17x12-inch triangle.
 2. Fit the crust into an ungreased 15x10x1-inch pan, pressing firmly into the bottom, corners and sides. Fold the extra crust underneath and slightly on top of the pan, then flute the edges. Prick the sides and bottom of the crust with a fork and bake 10-12 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from the oven and cool 10 minutes.
 3. In a heavy saucepan, cook milk and pudding mix over medium heat for 8-12 minutes, stirring constantly, until the mixture comes to a full boil. Remove from heat, add chocolate chips and peppermint extract. Stir until the chips are melted and smooth. Let stand 5 minutes. Pour the pudding into the crust and spread smooth. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 3 hours or until set.
 4. When ready to serve, remove plastic wrap from the filling. Beat the whipped topping and marshmallow crème with an electric mixer on medium speed until well blended and smooth. Spread on top of pudding and top with crushed peppermint candies.

Rich Cocoa Fudge

RECIPE IS FROM HERSHEY'S.

- 3 cups sugar
 - 2/3 cup cocoa
 - 1/8 tsp. salt
 - 1 ½ cups milk
 - ¼ cup butter
 - 1 tsp. vanilla extract
1. Line an 8- or 9-inch square pan with foil, extending the foil over the edge of the pan. Butter the foil.
 2. Mix the sugar, cocoa and salt in a heavy saucepan. Stir in the milk and cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture comes to a full rolling boil. Boil without stirring until the mixture reaches 234 degrees on a candy thermometer or until a small amount of mixture dropped into ice water forms a soft ball.
 3. Remove from heat. Add the butter and vanilla, but do not stir. Cool at room temperature to 110 degrees, then beat with a wooden spoon until the fudge thickens and begins to lose some of its gloss, or about 7 minutes.
 4. Quickly spread into the prepared pan and cool completely.



LEFTOVERS

Holiday leftovers get old fast. There are only so many turkey and ham sandwiches one family can eat. Get out of the leftover rut and put all of those delicious groceries to use with these great leftover recipes.

Hand Pies

RECIPE IS FROM CAMPBELL'S.

- ¾ cup prepared stuffing
 - ¾ cup chopped cooked chicken or turkey
 - ½ cup whole berry cranberry sauce
 - 2 tbs. turkey gravy
 - 1/3 cup chopped, cooked green beans or carrots
 - 2 tbs. all-purpose flour
 - 1 (17.3-oz.) package puff pastry sheets, thawed
 - 1 egg
 - 1 tbs. water
1. Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Stir together the stuffing, turkey, half the cranberry sauce, gravy and vegetables.
 2. Sprinkle flour on a work surface. Unfold one pastry sheet and lightly roll to remove the fold marks. Cut the sheet into three, 3-inch strips. Cut crosswise into three, 3-inch squares. Repeat with the other sheet, making about 18 squares.
 3. Beat the egg and water together and brush the edges of half the squares with the egg wash. Spoon about a teaspoon of remaining cranberry sauce in the center of each, then top with the stuffing mixture. Top with the remaining squares and pinch together the edges to seal. Place the filled pastries onto a baking sheet and, using a sharp knife, make three small cuts in the top of each to vent. Brush pastries with the rest of the egg wash.
 4. Bake for 20 minutes or until the pastries are golden brown. Serve with additional gravy or cranberry sauce, warmed, for dipping.

7 STEPS

TO MAKE 2021 EXTRAORDINARY!



BY CONNIE ALBERS

In general, we all know that we should eat healthy foods, sleep more and focus on one task at a time. But, homeschool parents can't focus on only one task. We teach and oversee our children's education, manage the home, work from home and put food on the table while trying to keep our sanity.

No matter what 2020 brought your way, 2021 is the year of innovation — a year of possibilities for millions of families who joined the homeschool community. The disruption of the past gave birth to new methods of educating children. Now is the time to create an extraordinary year for your family.

Whether you've been getting by or sailing through, here are seven steps to help you make 2021 a great year.



EMBRACE YOUR SEASON

My grandparents were farmers. I learned valuable lessons from my grandmother about farm life. The one lesson she stressed most was paying attention to the seasons. Why is this lesson so important?

In farming, there is a time to plant, water, harvest and rest. Spring, summer, fall and winter! Farmers have to be aware of the seasons. She'd say, "If farmers miss a season, the harvest is impacted."

I put this step at the top because embracing your season is key to keeping your home running smoothly. We can't look at what others are doing and think we have to do it all. I've learned that building a family is a lot like farming. We must embrace our season of life and make decisions accordingly.



SET SPECIFIC GOALS

All people, including children, need to set some goals.

If we wake up without any specific goals, we won't have the motivation to push us forward on hard days. What's more, our progress will be slower if we don't have something specific we want to accomplish. For me, I wanted to get school finished by a particular time. The kids knew if they were diligent with their learning, they would get more free time to play games or pursue specific areas of interest.

When you're setting your goals, be specific. Vague generalities like lose weight, read more books or prepare a month of freezer meals won't work without specific goals.

To succeed, create short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. They can refer to each child, your homeschool, your budget and your personal life. The more time you spend planning, the more likely you are to make achievable and realistic goals. Also, make sure to write out a plan to cope with everyday tasks. It will make your days run more smoothly.



ELIMINATE A BAD HABIT

Now is a perfect time to eliminate bad habits. I think it is safe to say we all have habits that don't serve us well, whether it be biting our nails, hitting the snooze button, drinking too much coffee or overscheduling our days.

Breaking bad habits can be difficult, especially if we've been doing them for a long time. We've all probably tried to change only to end up giving up because it was so hard. But don't give up!

The best way to break a bad habit is to:

- Identify your triggers.
- Replace the bad habit with a new one.
- Dump the all or nothing mindset.
- Get an accountability partner.
- Change your routine.
- Focus on why you want to change.

We can conquer our bad habits, but we must manage our expectations and be patient with ourselves. If you stumble, start again. Don't allow yourself to quit.



SCHEDULE BREAKS

We often underestimate the need for breaks. We get so immersed in our day that we don't take time to stop for a few minutes. You can find many articles written on the benefits of taking breaks throughout the day.

As a homeschool parent, taking a couple of short breaks will help you nurture your soul. They don't have to be long breaks. Scheduling breaks gives your mind some time to think about what is stirring inside your heart. It can be easy to push through the day, never acknowledging your personal need for downtime. But if you waste your breaks browsing through social media posts, you'll neither relax nor refresh your mind.

So, when you're taking a break, try to do something just for you. Reading a few pages of a book or listening to relaxing music with your eyes closed are just a couple of the possible activities. The ages of your children will dictate the types of breaks available.

The more energy you regain during these breaks, the higher your stamina for the rest of the day will be.



JOURNAL EVERYDAY

When I was a new mom, I wanted to document the milestones in my children's lives. I wrote down little things like when they crawled, when they took their first steps, and what was their favorite toys. That simple act of journaling on and off led to a lifelong habit of writing down memorable moments.

Journaling allows us to summarize our days. I wrote down funny sayings, doctor's visits and prayer requests. I know you've heard this before, but you do forget some of those moments over time. But when you write it down, you can look back and see how their Creator was writing their story — one day at a time.

When I sit down to journal, I try to focus on their character and personality traits. Writing life-giving words about them helped me stay hopeful and optimistic about our homeschool journey.

If you'd like to start journaling this year, but the idea seems daunting to you, I recommend you start with five minutes in the morning or five minutes in the evening. And even in that short amount of time, I think you'll be amazed by how many memories you wrote!



STOP COMPLAINING

Complaining is one of the strongest urges that exists. When the kids don't do their school, we complain. When the day doesn't go as planned, we complain. While it is tempting to grumble, we must remain focused on our goals. The impact of complaining squelches creativity and productivity throughout the household.

While frustrations arise, you need to practice voicing your concerns in a constructive manner, so you feel heard, which also applies to your children. You will have grievances that need to be discussed. However, after the matter is talked through, everyone must work to find a solution. Continuing to complain will only bring tension and greater frustrations in your home.



AVOID COMPARING

As a mom of five uniquely gifted children, I would often hear my children compare themselves to each other. "I'm not smart like my brother." "I can't read as fast as my sister." I'm not as good at basketball or soccer or piano." The list was endless. Comparing was an ongoing issue that changed from year-to-year.

It's human nature to look around and compare what we are doing to others. But it is a destructive habit that blinds us from seeing each child's progress, and social media has made it even easier for us to do it.

We can develop our children's gifts and talents in a way that increases confidence in who they are made to be without putting them into a box of conformity.

Teach them to draw on the strengths of each other to complete a project. Help them pursue their individual goals. When children don't feel the pressure to be like their siblings, they can explore the world of possibilities available to them.

2021 is a year of opportunity and togetherness. It's a year where your children can discover and solve problems together by incorporating these seven steps. Let's make this an extraordinary year for your family.

Connie Albers is an author, speaker, serial entrepreneur and connector dedicated to helping parents and students discover who they were created to be and how to cultivate lasting relationships. She has five children with her husband, Tom, and is the author of "Parenting Beyond the Rules," which outlines positive approaches to parenting today's teenagers.



BY TODD WILSON

When faced with the New Year, there are two kinds of people in this world: Those who love to make New Year's resolutions ... and those who don't.

The pro-resolution makers look at the new year as a challenge to better themselves, their children, their family, and sadly, their husbands. They make lists and steps for "betterment" ... often stick to their plans for up to two weeks and then fall back into their old ways. But every year they try, try again.

The anti-resolution makers have resigned themselves to the fact that they are stuck in bad habits, have kids with bad habits and husbands with annoying habits and say, "What's the use? Things are never going to change." They feel the tinge of guilt every Jan. 1, but ignore it and slump off to endure another year of failure and broken dreams.

I think I've fallen into both camps at different times, but I'm now offering up a THIRD option as we face the coming year. I'm calling it the – OK, I don't

Sadly, many homeschool moms spend a chunk of their homeschooling life disappointed with the present, always hoping for a better future. "If only the kids would get serious about their studies, their faith, their future If we could just be more organized, get more done and be more diligent

the perfect schedule or the meticulously clean home, healthiest body and the happiest attitude.

Maybe the resolution is called: A Year of Contentment.

Now I know some would say, "How can you be satisfied with the struggle against sin, apathy and laziness?" Well, when you put it that way, it does sound bad, but that's not what I'm saying. I think sometimes resolution makers use that excuse as a reason

THE BEST

... I wish my husband would lead better, be more involved and care about my needs."

Here's my proposal for the year 2021: That we would be content with wherever God has placed us. That we would be content with the children we have, not the ones they might become someday. That we would be content

to not be content with feeling normal, thinking they can't be happy unless they get a handle on their own inadequacies and shortcomings.

The problem is that they never get a handle on their own inadequacies and shortcomings and are always disappointed with those around them – and their family knows it.

I can remember saying to my beloved bride one time, "Can't you just be OK with who were are NOW?" Our children don't want us to love who they might become, but who they are.

They need to see our smiles of contentment instead of the constant look of displeasure at all that they do. "Why can't you be more diligent, get more done, care about spiritual things, be more obedient or act more mature?"

I'm afraid, Mom, that we're never going to get what we hope for and

OK, I don't have a name for it yet – but the idea is this: I'm going to be happily OK (not just resigned to the fact) with me and my family the way we are right now.

have a name for it yet – but the idea is this: I'm going to be happily OK (not just resigned to the fact) with me and my family the way we are right now.

with our husband the way he is now, even if he never changes. That we would be content with not being perfect, not having the perfect house or

will have missed a whole lifetime of what we had.

I remember a dad who came up to me at a homeschool convention. He had hung around the entire week-end. Mostly we just chit-chatted and laughed, but toward the end of the convention he finally leaned into me and got serious. "What do you do about the chaos and constant bickering?" he asked.

I know he was looking for some

hound them, holler and correct, but that's probably not going to solve the problem, and you will have missed out on some great family time. So what I would do is enjoy these fleeting days of chaos because one day they will be over and you will wish you could get them back."

So that's what I'm leaving with you, Mom, for the year 2021, the year of contentment. Start by thanking God for the issues you have, the issues your

YEAR EVER!

kind of special insight that I, the Familyman, have about raising children, but I remember looking him in the eye and answering, "I'd enjoy it because one day it will be silent."

He looked kind of stunned. That was not what he expected me to say. He wanted something more concrete, more applicable – something that would solve the problem.

"You know," I added, "you could

children have and the issues your husband has. The truth is, God is using those issues to make you who He wants you to be. In fact, they are the things that make your family who they are.

It may not be what you envisioned or read about in magazine articles (stop reading those by the way), but it is a gift that will pass so quickly.

Can I lead you in prayer?

Dear Father,

Thank you for making me who I am. Thank you for the body you've given me, the health you've given me and the issues that I'm facing. Thank you for the children you have blessed me with. Thank you for the loud ones, the grumpy ones and the hard ones. Thank you for my husband. Thank you for making him the way he is. Thank you for making him not like me. Thank you for allowing us to homeschool even if it doesn't go the way I think it should.

Help me to not miss this amazing time of life or wish it away. Help me to learn to be content with whatever you send our way. Let me not compare my life with others and forgive me for coveting my neighbor's homeschool. May I be content in all things and may my smile be evidence of that to my family.

I ask all this in YOUR name, Amen.

So Mom, enjoy the start to a wonderful year. Will it be perfect? NO. Will it be wonderful? Yes, if you allow it to be.

Be Content!

TODD WILSON, is a husband, dad, grandpa, writer, homeschool conference speaker, and former pastor. Todd's humor and down to earth realness have made him a favorite speaker all across the country and a guest on Focus on the Family. As founder of The Familyman and The Smiling Homeschooler, his passion and mission are to remind moms and dads of what's most important through weekly emails, podcasts, seminars and books that encourage parents. Todd, and his wife Debbie, homeschool four of their eight children (the other four are homeschool graduates) in northern Indiana and travel America in the Familyman Mobile. You can read more at www.familymanweb.com



LISTENING

THE FOUNDATION
of the
LANGUAGE ARTS



BY ANDREW PUDEWA

While most people who know of me consider me a conference speaker or an instructor of writing, some are aware that in my early adult life I was a full-time violin teacher and early childhood music educator. My change of career is an interesting story in itself, but what has interested me more over the past few decades is the remarkable connection between music experience at an early age and language development. The tag line for our company, “Institute for Excellence in Writing,” is: Listen. Speak. Read. Write. Think!, and our programs and materials are aimed at cultivating these core arts of language. So what has music to do with that?

I had my first glimpse into the importance of listening to music more than 30 years ago when I took my first Kindermusik™ teacher training course. After observing a demonstration lesson with a group of children around 5 years old, our discussion centered on how to deal with a boy who was clearly not tuned in and was demonstrating what might be called “behavior challenges.” While I assumed this was a discipline and classroom management issue, our more experienced trainers knew better; that this child’s behavior was the result of a weakness in listening and therefore in processing language. Although we did not know what label he might have carried, what was remarkable to observe was his immediate response to a focused listening activity. The children were asked to sit quietly, close their eyes and listen to “Flight of the Bumblebee” by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, a very vibratory piece. Surprisingly, this child was motionless during these few minutes, and when it was finished the first words out of his mouth were “play it again!” Our trainers, Drs. Coulter and Heyge, pointed to this as further proof that what this boy desperately needed was more music. Why?

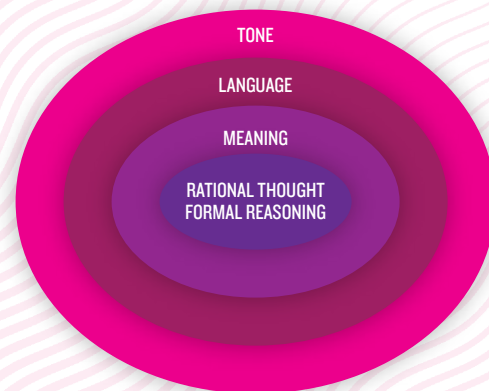




When a child emerges from the womb, he or she hears sounds but recognizes few of them. Perhaps his mother's voice or maybe an appliance in her kitchen, but the other sounds in the environment are new, strange and have little or no meaning for the child. There are both research studies as well as anecdotal evidence to suggest that children who repeatedly hear the same piece of music from speakers placed on the mother's body during pregnancy will recognize and respond to that music when played right after birth. However, the child very quickly begins to associate specific meanings for discrete sounds and will quickly be able to identify tonal differences as subtle as mom's keychain jingle versus dad's keychain jingle. Language is comprised of tones. If you hear a foreign language that you do not know, you're not really

hearing language, you're hearing tones. High tones, low tones, soft tones, hard tones, short tones, long tones, etc. But when the same combination of tones is heard in context, you can begin to associate meaning with those tones. Young children will do this much faster than adults, and their ability to recognize and understand vocabulary is always far ahead of their ability to speak those words.

The following diagram illustrates this process. A child is born into the world of vibration and then proceeds to differentiate tones. These tones then form words, words create language and language becomes a primary tool for rational thought. Therefore if a child has any kind of obstruction in this process (ADD, ADHD, auditory processing disorder, autistic spectrum symptoms or even physiological hearing impedi-



ments), the language skills of listening, speaking, even reading and writing may be delayed. This was the case for the little boy in my Kindermusik™ teacher training experience, and it became clear to us how incredibly valuable both playing and listening to music would be for him developmentally.

This explanation calls to mind the story of Helen Keller, who at 7 years old

and unable to hear or see, was completely isolated from any source of language and was wild and uncontrollable. However (at least according to the movie, “The Miracle Worker”), when her teacher, Annie Sullivan, was able to connect the word water with the idea of water by signing in her hand while splashing her, the breakthrough allowed her to move into the world of ideas and of abstract thought. Helen Keller later described the day Annie Sullivan came to her home as “my soul’s birthday.” She ultimately became one of the most remarkable authors and speakers of her time, mastering not one but several languages.

Fast forward 30 years and I am busy teaching teachers and parents how to cultivate the language skills in their children. One absolutely clear fact is this: Children’s speaking and writing is dependent on their listening. It is almost impossible for a child to say a word they have not heard and very unlikely they will attempt to write a word they have not said. As we get older and read at a higher level, we may grow our vocabulary from reading, but initially it comes from hearing and listening.

Notice that these words are almost synonymous, but not quite. Everyone hears; we hear all the time; we cannot not hear. But listen is a more active verb. It requires an object; we listen to something or we listen for something. Hearing is accidental; listening is intentional. Therefore it can and should be cultivated. Certainly we’ve all met some people who listen better than others. So my argument is that if you want to develop good language skills in children you start with listening, and the best way to do that is with music.

Too much of the music in our environment is accidental. It exists in stores or on car radios or in churches. Often even the music we bring into our home is not chosen as carefully as it should be, nor used with intention the way it could be. Immensely helpful to children is focused listening — a time where nothing else happens —

and children are encouraged to just sit, maybe even close their eyes, and just listen. Ideally, the same piece of music every day for five or six days a week. A short time is ideal — a few minutes, depending on the age of the children, with no other activity. Then, when listening time is done, ask them, “What did you hear?” and give them opportunity to narrate whatever they may have experienced or imagined.

One absolutely clear fact is this: Children’s speaking and writing is dependent on their listening. It is almost impossible for a child to say a word they have not heard and very unlikely they will attempt to write a word they have not said.

Repeated practice of focused listening of the same piece of music will bring about many good things.

First, there is the effect of anticipation. By hearing the same great piece of music every day, children begin to recognize it. With anticipation comes attentiveness, and with the fulfillment of anticipation comes joy. Secondly, there is the repetition of patterns that creates neural connections, which in turn creates brain processing power. Repetition builds recognition, which builds intelligence. Hearing the same thing many times makes us smarter!

Listening is a definitely skill which can be cultivated and starting with

focused listening to short excerpts of great music is the best place to start. You don’t really even need to know much about all the music available — just a few names: Bach, Mozart, Handel, Vivaldi. Start there. As the child’s attentiveness increases, add a few minutes, gradually working up to 10 or 15. Perhaps the child will ask for more!

The natural extension of focused listening to music is listening to language from books, which for almost everyone is a natural part of having children. Most, as soon as they can focus on a page of a picture book want to see and hear the corresponding words and ideas. As they get older, they are able to listen to stories and books with fewer pictures, and ultimately no pictures. Parental reading can be supplemented with audiobooks, both of which do far more to build vocabulary and syntax at a level above the language the child would accidentally encounter in daily conversation or from the environment. In fact, one of the most significant predictors of writing competence in adults is having been read to (a lot!) as a child. Never stop reading to children, even when they become independent readers themselves, at a level above their own decoding skills.

But I am convinced that the best way to cultivate the skill of listening begins with music, in an intentional, consistent way. So, whatever the age of your children, give it a try, and let me know how you like it!

Andrew Pudewa is the founder and director of the Institute for Excellence in Writing and a father of seven. He and his wonderful, heroic wife, Robin, have homeschooled their seven children and are now proud grandparents of fourteen, making their home in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



SUPPORTING TEENS

As They Step Out of
What's Comfortable



“Take chances, make mistakes, get messy.”

Miss Frizzle, science teacher extraordinaire, inspires her learners to step out of what's comfortable, especially Arnold.

You can, too!

How we parent our teens empowers them to step out of what's comfortable and into what could be life-changing. Like adults, teens need encouragers who believe they were created with traits and skills to make a difference in and contribute to the lives of others. The more teens experience the results of their efforts, the more confident they become and the more willing they are to try new things or take additional risks.

Middle and high schoolers are individuals, distinctive in what matters to them, how they are motivated, and what they find encouraging. Understanding these aspects of our teen's personality determines what options could be most effective in empowering them to take chances, make mistakes and try again.



BY CHERYL BASTIAN

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

When you are with someone all day, it's easy to see the flaws, the negative. Though there are times when

correction is warranted, teens need to know they possess valued character traits and giftings, qualities people appreciate about them. Accentuating the positive is one way parents can take a proactive position versus a reactionary response. Our words to our teens can "be life-giving water; words of true wisdom refreshing as a bubbling brook" (Proverbs 18:4). Positivity goes much further than continual corrections or criticism.

GIVE TIME

One of the best gifts we've given our children is time. Time to develop, time to master and time to manage. When we released time for our teens to ponder and envision their future, they heard, "I trust you with this time and know you have the ability to navigate it." This can feel counter intuitive; yet, if parents micromanage every moment of every day, teens default to waiting for someone to tell them what to do and how to do it. This can undermine not only their ability to discover their strengths, but also to whittle away at their confidence. Releasing chunks of responsibility in the tween years offers opportunities to practice decision-making prior to the bigger — potentially more challenging choices — faced in high school. In addition, the young adult begins to seek and anticipate what God has for them, not only in the present but in the future.

PROVIDE EMPOWERMENT

Words and intentional actions speak life into our teens. Teens soak in this type of empowerment like a sponge, especially when they face hard

decisions and challenges. I remember our son working through high school courses, taking a dual enrollment course, playing baseball and working part-time. It was a demanding semester for him intellectually and physically. I looked for ways to let him know I noticed his efforts and was cheering him on. One day, when he left his room to refresh his water, I snuck in and placed a few chocolates on his books. When he returned and made the discovery, he immediately came to me, smiling ear-to-ear, thanking me. My small gift served as a renewed reminder that I knew he could successfully finish the semester.

HELP PROCESS

Sorting through feelings and decisions occurs daily for all of us, but especially for teens as they become aware of their interests and strengths and navigate new situations and emotions. As a result, teens reach out to people they know will engage and listen. Knowing this, I do my best to be accessible, give my full attention, and mirror what I hear by asking clarifying questions. Sometimes we, together, list pros and cons and brainstorm possible challenges or fears which may stand in the way of next steps. Acting on their vision or idea, helping them process, figure out, and take the first step — the most difficult — the second and third steps follow and confidence begins to soar, even when storms brew on the horizon.

BE MINDFUL AND PRESENT

Sometimes our words tell our teens we know they can accomplish a specific task, but our body language or tone of voice communicates the opposite. For example, when I accompany my teen on an errand or to an event, my phone must be tucked away. If it's out, he or she may be reluctant to ask hard questions or engage on a questionable topic, fearful the phone ping will dis-

tract me. My words matter; however, it is just as important to be mindful of what distracts me from being present.

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

These types of inquiries can't be answered with a yes or no. They spur on deeper thinking and conversation, often ushering in potential and possibility. Examples of open-ended questions include

What science topics would you like to study this year?

What career fields do you find most engaging?

What was the most challenging aspect of volunteering today?

How do you see yourself using these skills you are learning in your future career field?

COME ALONGSIDE AND PARTNER

Most of us want to know someone is with us, walking alongside, praying for us and cheering us on, especially when faced with new situations. This is also true of our tweens and teens. For our family, this has looked like volunteering together, driving the teen to a craft store or library or giving them a hug before they leave the house for class. While processing with our teens, sometimes we ask, "Is there a sibling or friend you would feel comfortable going with?" From the teen's answer, sometimes it becomes clear he or she would prefer Mike or I go on a youth camping trip or participating in a field trip. Though there are times when our children needed to go alone to help them build the confidence, there were also times when they needed us to attend due to uncertain circumstances.

COMMUNICATE VALUE

We all need to know we contribute to something. When teens understand how their strengths and actions could be used to make a difference, they begin to grasp their potential impact on a cause or on the lives of others.



With this knowledge, there's a base of confidence and purpose from which to take on an unfamiliar task. If I observe a teen making a meaningful contribution, I encourage with "Your gift of hospitality and your smile helped people feel appreciated at the party today," or "Your determination will fuel this difficult project. I confident you will follow through." Hearing true statements about value and contribution is a priceless gift that affirms strengths and boosts confidence.

RELEASE FEAR AND SAY "YES"

I've discovered saying "yes" to a teen's idea — even when I think it seems fruitless or unrealistic — fuels motivation, fosters creativity, builds confidence and clears a path for additional possibilities. It also cultivates responsibility and promotes growth. As I think back to the "yes" answers I had a hard time giving, I have no regrets, even with the challenges. Saying yes to starting a business led to paying cash to buy a car. A yes to a mission trip nurtured a long-term passion to

eradicate poverty. The answer "yes" is skin in the game, a noticeable sacrifice signifying, "I am behind you on this!" It's an understanding that anything is possible because with God all things are possible. Our teens can do amazing things, and often it starts with "yes."

ACCEPT FAILURE

Failure is inevitable. It's part of trying new things and stepping out. Reassure your teens in the new and welcome adjustments. Process and pray. Talk about what can be done differently or changed. Cheer on those second and third tries. Essential soft skills, skills employers and team members seek — adaptability, collaboration, and flexibility — are developing. Satisfaction of success amid trial has the ability to usher in growth not possible by other means.

FIND MENTORS

Our son decided to build an 8x12 shed as his Eagle Scout project. Though Mike and I said yes and could help process scheduling, transport to appointments, act as cheerleaders and even hammer a few nails, our construction knowledge was limited. We knew our son needed a mentor, someone knowledgeable who could coach him the nitty-gritty details of the project. We prayed alongside him; thought about who we knew. Being open-minded and hopeful, we noticed what was organically readily available to our teen. Truth be known, often there are mentors in our midst; we simply have to put fear aside and embrace the possibilities. In the end, he had THREE mentors for the project! These men guided and empowered our son as he learned the benefits of partnering with experienced professionals. Mentors help our teens shorten their learning curves and offer additional perspectives and insights into giftings and strengths.

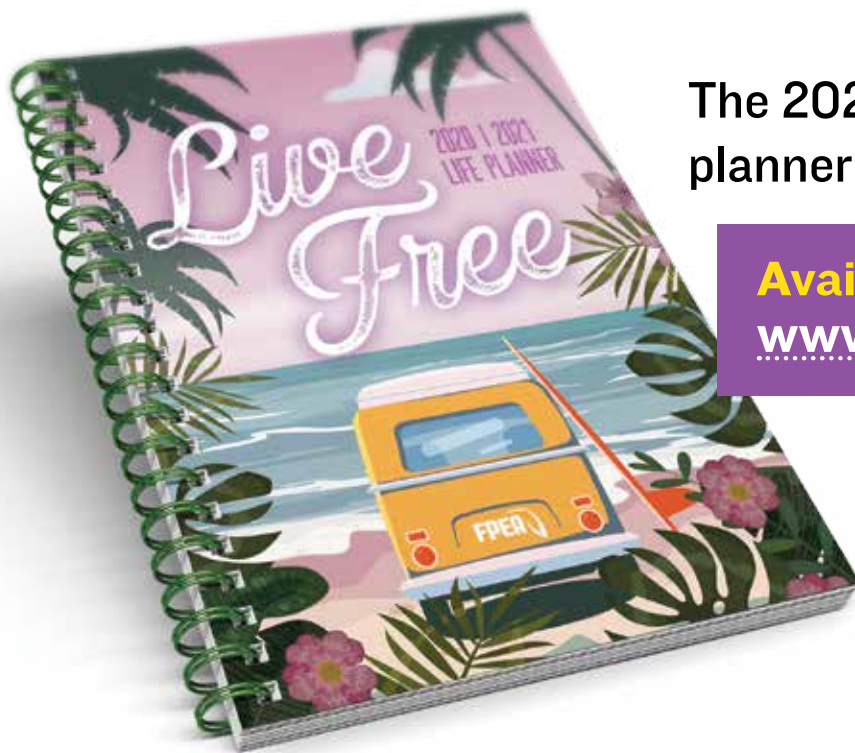
MODEL CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Our teens watch us, becoming keenly aware of what we believe, what we think and in what we place our trust. I remind myself of this truth, not so I can pile guilt and anxiety on myself, but to walk more confidently in the One who calls and equips. I want my teens to walk in that truth as well — to step out confidently from the comfortable and live in opportunity, not anxiety. There's potential in possibilities and goodness in making mistakes and trying again.

Teens have aspirations and goals. They to make a difference, but they also want someone to walk alongside, listen and engage. When opportunities avail, tell your teens what you admire about them. Help them process ideas and encourage them to take those hard first steps. As a need or concern comes to the surface, be accessible, release personal fears and say yes. Cheer your teens on, especially when they need courage to make changes and start over. The teen years set a foundation for what is to come. They matter and they are a season ripe with opportunities to step out, take chances and be a part of solutions. And, we parents have the glorious ability to watch this all take place.

Cheryl Bastian can't remember not teaching. Playing school with her brothers evolved to working as a teacher's assistant at a pre-school. Her passion for education continued, launching her to post-secondary coursework at Illinois State University. Eventually, Cheryl left the classroom and began her 26-year home education journey with eight children ages 30 to 4. An author, blogger and speaker, Cheryl shares trials and triumphs, encouraging parents to be intentional, real and relational as they raise life-long learners. Her resources are available at Celebrate Simple, www.cherylbastian.com

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THE

HOLIDAYS:

Make This Year Different!



BY HAL & MELANIE YOUNG

When you think of the holidays, what comes to mind? Do you think of the wonderful smells – evergreens, cloves and cinnamon? Or perhaps you love Christmas carols or movies? Or maybe you feel some anxiety about all the gifts you need to buy and the hurry and bustle that seems overwhelming?

The hurry, the stress, the bustle — they all conspire to tempt us to settle for the form and not the substance. It's easy to run around doing Christmas-y things and somehow never take the time to really talk to our kids, *really* talk to them, about what all this means.

And that's a shame. The holidays are a wonderful time to make strides in the two most important tasks we have as parents, relationship and discipleship. If you're like us, encouraging our children to follow Christ is the most important thing we can think of. Do you know what is the biggest predictor that a child raised in the Christian faith will serve the Lord as an adult? Research shows that it is a good relationship with a Christian parent! That really drives home the need for both relationship *and* discipleship, doesn't it?

The holidays are an ideal time to build both! The very word holiday originally meant "holy day." Throughout the Old Testament, God set up feast days or holidays as times that His people would stop and reflect on what God had done in their history and what He was doing today in their lives. The holidays are a great time to tell the stories to our children — to tell of God's works in history, but also in our family.

The holidays are also the perfect time to build the memories that will link our kids' hearts to home and hopefully, through those memories, to the things that we have taught them.

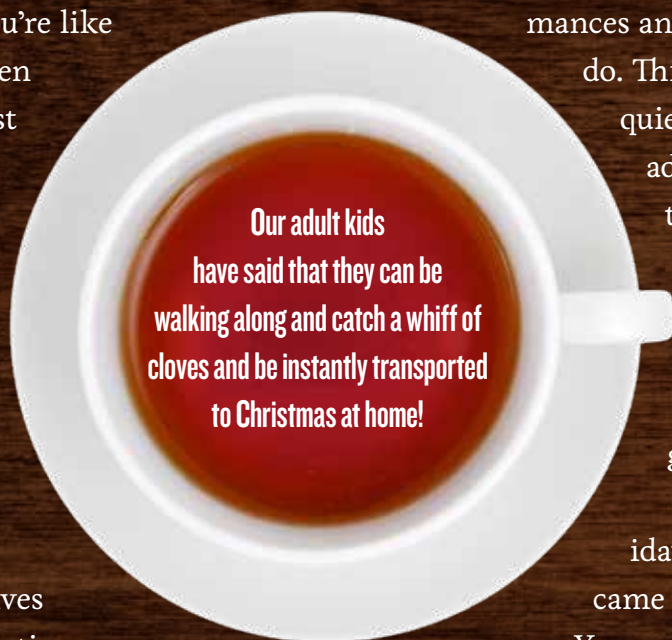
One of our favorite holiday treats is Christmas tea, a hot, spicy, fruity cup of happiness. Our adult kids have said that they can be walking along and catch a whiff of cloves and be instantly transported to Christmas at home! Sounds and smells can be evocative like that and the holidays are full of them.

This year is likely to be different than we are used to. We probably won't have the performances and parties that we normally do. Things are likely to be a lot quieter. Maybe we should take advantage of that and make this a year that we really work at building special memories for our kids to carry into adulthood and point them to the gospel.

Some of our favorite holiday traditions are things we came up with ourselves:

Years ago, we were having a really rough time at Thanksgiving. In a desperate move to be grateful despite the trials, we cut a tree trunk out of brown paper and attached it to a wall. We put a bowl full of construction paper leaves in fall colors next to it, and several times a day we would write down blessings we appreciated and attach them to the tree. As the tree filled with colorful leaves — and many, many blessings, our attitudes changed and we realized all that we had to thank God for.

When we bake Christmas treats from family recipes, we talk about the family members they came from. We have cookies from Hal's dad,



candy from Melanie's grandmother, favorite dishes from both our families, and as we talk about them, our children get to know and appreciate relatives who are long gone from the earth.

Our annual Caroling Party is a memory maker for more than our family! When else can you knock at a stranger's door and bellow out the gospel in song and have them say, "Oh, please sing another!"? That's a tradition that we shouldn't let die out.

Another favorite tradition at our house is our annual Christmas Eve celebration. We don't have an ordinary dinner. Instead, we put out fancy party foods and all our Christmas baking on our most elegant china and silver dishes. We enjoy the food, read the Christmas story, and sing all the Christmas carols we know – and we know of a lot of them. Those fancy parties just for our family are among our kids' favorite memories.

Our family New Year's Eve parties have lots of great food, but we also spend time talking over all the things the Lord did in our lives over the last year. On New Year's Day, we dream and brainstorm over what the new year might hold, and then we pray together about those future plans.

Your traditions may look very different than ours and that's OK! The important thing is that you do things that let you spend time together, whether that's working together baking cookies or having fun together eating them at a party, and that you intentionally talk about the things you want your kids to remember all their lives. If you do that, this holiday season is likely to be one your family talks about for years!

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Friends, we love FPEA! Our friends in Florida and FPEA have been such a blessing to us over the years. We'd like to bless you in return. We wrote a new book – "Christ-Centered Advent: Family Devotions Based on Christmas Carols" – and we'd like to give it to you FREE, along with "Christ-Centered Christmas," our family's guide to celebrating with purpose, and our printable "Christmas Carol Songbook" when you join our email community. Just head to this link. <https://www.raisingrealmen.com/christmasbundle/>

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

HAL & MELANIE YOUNG

Hal and Melanie Young are the award-winning, best-selling authors of "Raising Real Men, No Longer Little" and "Love, Honor, and Virtue," and the hosts of the "Making Biblical Family Life Practical" podcast. They are publishers, writers, bloggers and popular conference speakers internationally, known for their Christ-centered focus and practical, real-life stories. Hal and Melanie are the parents of six real boys (five grown!) and two real girls and live in noisy, messy happiness in North Carolina. Visit their blog and store <https://raisingrealmen.com>, follow them on Facebook (<https://facebook.com/raisingrealmen>), Instagram (<https://instagram.com/raisingrealmen>), and Pinterest (<https://pinterest.com/raisingrealmen>), and join their Facebook group (<https://facebook.com/groups/raisingrealmencommunity>).



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