

Marking time

Crafty Ideas to help families count down to the holidays

By Kate Jonuska

Like the crack of a gun at a marathon's starting line, the Thanksgiving holiday signals to families that the holiday season has begun, a joyful span of time marching through Christmas or Hanukkah all the way to New Year's Day.

To a child, however, the holiday season can actually resemble that marathon: an interminable, exhausting journey to get to the festivities that promise sugary treats, fun activities and — of course — presents. The thought "Are we there yet?" jangles about in their heads along with visions of sugar plums.

This Thanksgiving, carve out some post-turkey quality time and channel your child's upcoming anticipation into a countdown craft.

"I think that kids like to anticipate," says Jean Bishop, a children's librarian at Penrose Library, who believes parents can both encourage and direct their child's anticipation with a craft to mark off the days until Christmas or Hanukkah. "It's a measurable way to count down their excitement," she continues. "It gives you a sense of something you can visually look at and see."

Plus, getting down and dirty with the glue and glitter brings families together. Bishop, who organizes creative events at the library for kids from preschool-age to teenage, has seen the transformation firsthand.

"It strengthens families whenever they do projects together. It also helps them learn our cultural values and their family's cultural values," she explains. Crafting fosters self-esteem, too, because when children devote their energy and imagination to a handmade project, it inspires pride.

"That's the art experience," says Bishop. "And right along with the art experience, it helps kids with fine motors skills, hand-eye coordination."

In fact, the hidden educational

benefits of fun countdown activities are numerous. Preschool and early elementary children practice cutting and tying, shapes and colors, number recognition, counting and more. Older kids can take it further into addition, subtraction, sequencing and literacy skills.

And don't count out the teenagers. "Even though you are 16 or 17 years old, you still like those traditions. They create warm and fuzzy feelings, and you want to recreate those feelings even when you're older," says Bishop.

Homemade fun may be just what Santa ordered to alleviate some of the commercialization of the season, too. Using inexpensive, reused or recycled materials to make something by hand not only saves money, it also takes the holiday focus away from presents and other material goods.

"Christmas is a very financially tight time of year," says Bishop. "Money is taken right out of the equation when you are having fun as a family and doing something you enjoy."

This turkey day, try starting a new holiday crafting tradition by taking a few of Bishop's tips to heart, and check out the following step-by-step instructions for crafts that can be tailored to any age group and any family.

Reuse and recycle: Egg carton Christmas tree

Made by Jean Bishop, inspired by "Crafts for Christmas" by Kathy Ross

Materials:

2 egg cartons

Glue

Green acrylic paint

Paintbrush

Poster board or flattened cereal box

24 trinkets, such as rhinestones,

pompoms or stickers

1. Cut two egg cartons into six pieces: one row of one, one row of two and on up to one row of six. You should have three cups leftover for the tree's trunk. Paint the

egg carton pieces with green paint.

2. Arrange the pieces in the shape of a tree on a piece of poster board (or a cereal box which has been opened at the seams and laid flat). Glue to the board.

3. Every day of December, allow your child to glue a trinket onto the tree. Or, use stickers for a no-mess solution for younger kids.

Bonus tips: Help your child count the remaining days until Christmas as a mathematical exercise, or allow them to add the day's marker only after they've finished their chores.

Flexible fun: Many options for garland crafts

1. Hang a length of garland somewhere in your home (across the mantle or perhaps along the stair rail).

2. If you would like to create a "countdown" garland, meaning you will take one craft off every day of December, choose a craft that can contain a special goodie such as a chocolate kiss or a peppermint. This option can place more work on the parent rather than the child, so is ideal for younger kids.

Bonus tip: Parents who discourage sweets can enclose a special poem or, even better, a bundle of puzzle pieces. At the end of the month, the child should be able to complete the puzzle.

3. If you'd like to create a "count up" garland, meaning a different craft can be added every day, your craft options are endless. Younger children can construct basic shapes out of pipe cleaners or cut and decorate pieces of felt. The sky is the limit for older children (and parents with Martha Stewart tendencies): Mold, bake and paint holiday shapes in clay; create reusable santas, reindeer or snowmen with fabric; or decoupage match boxes like the folks at www.artchixstudio.com,



Countdown crafts can be scaled for your child's age with something as simple as the egg carton Christmas tree at right (photo by Bill Sommer) or the more complex and artful decoupage matchboxes above (photo courtesy of www.artchixstudio.com).



whose artful creations are shown above.

Good deed jar: Encouraging the holiday spirit

1. Find a container to use as your good deed jar.

2. Write down a list of good deeds your child can complete before the big holiday, making sure the deeds are small enough to complete in one day and age appropriate.

3. Examples of good deeds could include:

• Write a holiday letter to a

deployed soldier.

• Find a canned food drive in your area and donate.

• Go through your toys for donations for the less fortunate.

• Ask a neighbor if they need help shoveling snow.

• Call Grandma or Grandpa just to say hello.

• Help Mom or Dad stamp the family's holiday cards.

4. Shake up the jar and choose one deed per day in December. If you'd like, offer a special activity as the child's reward for completing all their good deeds. ☺