

A sunburst graphic with numerous thin, light gray lines radiating from a central point behind the text.

Healthy Moms Podcast

BY **Wellness Mama**[®]
simple answers for healthier families

Episode 123: Sharing Gratitude, Joy and Christmas
Family Traditions

Child: Welcome to my mommy's podcast.

Katie: Hello and Merry Christmas. This is going to be a short episode because I am enjoying family time today and all this week, and I hope that you are, too. And I'm actually camped out right now in my closet because it's the only quiet place and also because the acoustics are pretty good and the baby is sleeping.

But I just wanted to take a few minutes to share how grateful I am for you and for this community that you are a part of now. I have said for years that parents have such a unique ability to change the world and to change the future of health for our kids. And, I think, in this country, over the last few years, we're really starting to see that actually happen. Those changes are happening really on the front lines with moms and parents, making changes in their own families. And I think that's where we're gonna see the long term difference.

So, thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart for caring about living a more natural life and for leading the way with your own family. I love the amazing community that's developed here and I know that you guys truly are all changing the world.

And secondly, I just wanted to take a second to send some virtual hugs to all of you because I know that as wonderful as this time of the year can be, it can also be a time of stress for moms, especially with family visiting or missing family members who we have lost or who can't visit anymore. And I know it can be a time of wonderful memories, but also extra cooking and cleaning, and less sleep as moms. So, if you're struggling through any of those things right now, this year, like I am, I just wanted to send you my hugs and love and hope that things get easier soon.

And third, I just wanted to ask if you have literally one minute and would like to give me a Christmas gift. I would love if you could take a second and leave a rating or review on this podcast, which helps other moms and families to find it. And I'd love to hear your honest feedback. So, if you are on an iPhone, you can find that under the iTunes store under podcast, or on an Android, that should be on the Stitcher store, or if you go to wellnessmama.fm, on that page, it can show you where to leave a rating and review, and I would be honored if you would take a second.

And in the spirit of holidays, I also just thought it would be fun to share some of my family's Christmas traditions and I'd love to hear yours, too. So, if you have special traditions, leave a comment on the podcast or on the blog or on Facebook, and just say hi because I'd love to hear yours, too.

And one of them is the Feast of the Seven Fishes. So, for us, this happened last night and this has been a family tradition for us for years. And, sort of, here's where it comes from. So, I learned early on that when you get married, you also marry your husband's sports teams, at least with my guy. So, go Reds. Go Bangles. But this extends to cultural traditions, too. So, especially if he comes from a family with a strong cultural background. And this is where one of our favorite traditions, the Feast of the Seven Fishes comes from. It finds its roots there.

My hubby came from large family. He's an Italian on one side, and he and all his siblings really identify as Italian even though that's only a part of their culture. And, of course, we want to take the best of all of our traditions and culture from all of our families and bring those into with our own kids.

So, from the Italian side, this means, of course, that we've brought lots of amazing foods and recipes and things like that. And one of my favorites is for sure the Feast of the Fishes. So, I have, over the years, modified meatball recipes and pasta recipes, even biscotti recipes to fit all of our dietary and allergy requirements, and we've kept many of his culinary traditions alive. And this is a Sicilian-American tradition that we celebrated last night in particular. It's really easy and fun to continue because it's called the Feast of the Seven Fishes or La Vigilia in Southern Italy or in Sicily. And as the name suggests, this tradition is literally making seven or more types of fish on Christmas Eve.

So back to that thing I said at the beginning about moms not relaxing so much. There's a lot of debate actually about where this originated, and we continue it simply because we love the connection to his family. So, I'm not a purist and I know that there are other many interpretations of what the original feast was. For us, it's just a family tradition. But eating fish on Christmas Eve can trace back to the Roman Catholic tradition of abstaining from meat on Fridays, as well as specific Holy Days or before big feast days. So, abstaining from meat on Christmas Eve would have signified waiting for the feast on Christmas itself.

The number seven is also a pretty relevant number. There are families who serve fewer numbers of fish, some serve more, but seven, they think is the most likely number because of the strong cultural and historical significance of that number. So, it's taken me almost a decade to finally get into a good routine for this Christmas Eve meal. And as you imagine, there's a lot of prep work and cooking involved. I have basically added one dish each year until I got to the full seven fish over the last few years. And I now make various small dishes of each fish that involve, you know, the different kinds of fish so that we don't have a gigantic meal.

So, we might each have, like, one mussel, and one oyster, or a little crab dip, and a cod cake or a few shrimps. So, it's not a huge meal. It's just the tradition of the actual different types of fish. So, that was our one that we did last night and it's been a fun one over the years with things like roasting whole fish, or the kids are all daring each other to try fish eyeballs, and it's just the different funny things that have gone with it, but that was our Christmas Eve tradition.

And another one that we could actually, I think, officially call a tradition now in our house is the idea of limiting gifts because while the movies portray all these images of, like, happy families laughing and roll around the fireplace with gifts out everywhere and everyone's happy, I think, in reality, often moms just end up more stressed out and burned out. And I know I fall into the trap each year and I know it's easy to do, but to do this what we've helped...what really helps me with my stress level and also with our family and focusing on the family time and traditions, and not just the gifts is to limit to one material gift.

So, we might also include some experience-based gifts, or like their photo books, which I'll talk about in a minute, but only one "material gift" that they want and don't actually need. And we came to this tradition after realizing a few things. So, think for a second about your grandparents' home when you were growing up. If it was anything like mine, it was probably a pretty small house with even smaller closets. And the closets weren't even that full.

So, my grandparents raised six kids on one side and four kids on the other side in those houses and they didn't need drastic storage solutions or organizing. They weren't calling the container store and they didn't have a storage unit. But look at the change that's happened.

So, back in 2013, the "LA Times" reported that the average American home has over 300,000 items and there're over 50,000 storage facilities nationwide. In fact, this is actually the biggest real estate segment that's growing. And at least 1 in 10 of us that means have a storage unit, and there are now five times more storage units than Starbucks, which is crazy because I see Starbucks everywhere. There's enough physical space for every man, woman and child in the U.S. to stand in a storage facility at the same time.

So, that's what was really sobering to me to realize that we really do have so much stuff than people that just a couple of generations ago. So, our grandparents had an average of about nine outfits including dress clothes and work clothes. And now, we have an average of 30, plus a lot of extra clothes like workout gear that don't even qualify as an outfit. And the statistics that I have seen are that the average family spends close to \$2,000 on clothes and also gives or throws away 200 pounds of clothes. So, pretty staggering statistic, but it gets a little crazier when we look at toys even. This is what really shocked me.

They said the average child in the developed world owns over 200 toys, but only plays with 12 of them on average per day. And while only 3% of the world's children live in the U.S., they own 40% of the world's toys. So, that just was really staggering to me to realize and, I think, there's a perception that all these material possessions make us happy and, I think, some do make people happy in certain ways. But when we look at the data, it's not actually the case. So, we consume twice as much as we collectively did 50 years ago, but if you look at the stats, we're much less happy. 54% of people report being overwhelmed, 78% of us have no idea how to overcome the clutter according to some recent surveys.

Joshua Becker, who is a minimalist blogger, said that over the course of our lifetime, we will spend a total of 3,680 hours or 153 days searching for misplaced items. The research found that we lose up to 9 items every day, or 198,000 in a lifetime. So, phones, keys, sunglasses and paperwork are the top of the list. So, certainly, there's much more to why we are less happy than we used to be than just the excess clutter. But statistically, it's a contributor and it's an easy one to get rid of. So, our family has chosen to do the experiences, not stuff whenever possible. And that doesn't mean that we don't give gifts, but it just means we try to frame them in that term.

So, obviously, like experiences are great because we get family time as well, but there are some data behind it, too. So there's a researcher named Thomas Gallovich, if I'm saying that right, at Cornell. And he has spent more than a decade trying to understand why experiences have the ability to contribute to happiness so much more than material purchases. And with another researcher, Matthew Killingsworth, he published his research in the "Journal of Psychological Sciences," showing that experiences provide more lasting happiness than material possessions.

They basically concluded that people tend to get less happier when they purchase material things over time, and more happier with experiences over time. They think that this is because we adapt to physical things. So, even the nicest car or the newest phone becomes common place after enough time, while memories actually tend to get fonder over time. So, I thought that that was a really fascinating piece of research and one that's kind of guided our gift-giving term.

So, Gallovich explains that our experiences are a bigger part of ourselves than our material goods. You can really like your material stuff, of course. You can even think about part of your identity is connected those things. I think most of us do with our iPhones. But nonetheless, they remain separate from you. In contrast, your experiences are a part of you and we are the total sum of our experiences.

So, these researchers found that when we remember even negative experiences fondly as a funny story or a bonding experience, and experiences are also a uniting factor. Of course, people tell stories of those when we get together, and you are more likely to bond with someone who enjoys the same hobby or activity or has travelled to the same places than just someone who has a similar possession.

Also, the anticipation of leading up to an experience like an event or a trip has the potential to provide happiness itself, making it the gift that really keeps on giving. Happiness is in the anticipation, in the experience, and in the memories. So, I guess, it turns out Aristotle had it right all those years ago when he said that, "Men fancy that external goods are the cause of happiness, but leisure in it of itself gives pleasure and happiness the enjoyment of life."

So, like I said, this year and every year, we just really try to focus on the experiences. And we know from the research that shared experiences promotes family bonding. They know that kids have fewer behavioral problems. When we spend time as a family more, it gives a stronger sense of identity and security for kids, and lowers rates of violence, and improves academic success. So, on a practical level, just to give you an idea what it looks like for our family.

They still do get gifts, but they only get one want, one need, one wear, and one read. So, the want is the material gift, and this year that means a lot of Legos, bikes, and longboards are happening at our house. But the need gift in our family is the experience gift, because we think these are an actual need, and we budget and prioritize them as such. So, each child gets at least one experience-based gift, which could be a membership to a zoo or a science center or some kind of fun experience. These tend to get a little bit more daring each year. So there have been some fun ones where my husband, he's gotten flight lessons before. But try to get an experience-based gift.

And then a wear. So, our kids all have capsule wardrobes, and during the holidays, they often get one thing they need for that, usually, organic pajamas. And then the read. One thing to read, which is another tradition in our family. Number three for us is memory books. And we are big fans of books and reading in our house, but these are special books that I make each year as, kind of, a recap of their year. And so, I basically keep... Logistically, this is how I do it. I keep a folder on my desktop all year with each of my kids' names on it, and I drag photos from everything we do that year as we do them into the folder.

And at the end of the year, I upload all those photos of things like field trips and birthdays, and just daily life and camping trips, and any fun memories into a hardcover book that I print through different photo services. And if you wanna know the ones I use, they'll be in the show notes. But it's really easy. You just upload all these pictures, you can add captions if you want or designs, and then you print them. And this is my favorite thing to give them each year because it makes those memories come alive and it makes them stay. And when you talk about experiences, this is a really simple fun and space-saving way to remember them all.

And this is a gift they'll be able to take with them to their own families one day. So, they'll each leave home one day and I'm sure with many tears from me, but they'll leave with home with 18 books from their life that they can then show to their kids one day. So, that's a fun one to make and it's also fun for me to get to relive all the memories when I make the books, and that's one of their favorite traditions, too. They look forward to these books every year.

Another tradition we have is the time of giving back, the day or week, usually after Christmas, which basically is the idea of making room. If we're gonna have more possessions that come in the house through Christmas gifts, we have to make room. So, sometimes this happens before Christmas, sometimes it happens after. I find, like, the week after Christmas is great because everybody is not doing school, and this is the time when we can go through the house, find things that others could use and benefit from. Not just things we wanna get rid of, but things that we could share with others, and find a way to drop them off for someone who needs them or things like that.

And it can also mean just giving time and love. So, it might be visiting a nursing home or, you know, making gifts for a school that needs it, things like that. So, we find fun ways to do that as well. We try to also make gratitude a Christmas tradition. So, G.K. Chesterton wrote that, "I would maintain that thanks is the highest form of thought." And I feel, like, I am the one who has to focus the most on gratitude during Christmas because I'm the one who most easily falls in distress.

But we try to make gratitude part of ours. So we try to make a lot of time over Christmas to talk about the things we're grateful for, and to share times...share with others in the family why we're grateful for them, and just share experiences together then. And then to have gratitude for that. So, it's not really a firm tradition, it's not something we do just at a single time, but it's part of our tradition as well.

And then from there, we have some just fun very common traditions that probably most of you also participate in at some point. But we do the Christmas cards and the family photos, where we take actually one good Christmas...or one good photo per year, and I always have to, kind of, bribe the kids and threaten them a little and explain to them that I gave birth to them, and the one thing I require of them is just one photo a year and make them wear the clothes that we all are gonna wear. It's always a hassle, but it's all worth it. And that goes on the Christmas card, which I have just sent out. So, if you're my real life friend, it will be there after Christmas, but we do what we can. So, we do Christmas cards, but they don't usually actually get there by Christmas.

We also like to watch Christmas movies as a family. We don't watch TV often, but there's a few Christmas movies we do like to watch over and over. And my husband loves "A Christmas Story." We always watch "It's a Wonderful Life." Just movies like that which are fun to watch together. One of our kids' favorite traditions is the surprise Santa tradition, which is where we find another family, usually a local church or a domestic violence shelter or just different ways of finding someone who's truly in need locally, and we adopt them but secretly. And so, we'll find out through a friend or a third-party what they actually need and go shopping, wrap all the gifts, get food for several meals, get gift cards for them to get more food after that and to do shared experiences as well. And then we find a way to drop those off without being caught and, kind of, be their secret Santa.

And the kids absolutely love this, and I love that they love it. Even though we never actually get to see the look on anyone's face when they open the gifts or anything like that, it's really fun to be able to just anonymously share with someone. And I think it's a good message to teach as well, because, I think, that's something we really wanna impart to our kids is not just giving to charity as a monetary donation, but also try to be aware and to always keep your eyes open for those in your actual life, those around you in your community that need things and do things for them as well, because certainly, there are like, charitable programs that do that, but I think it sometimes means more when it comes from a real person.

And then, this year, we added a new tradition that I am not doing for the sake of everyone around me, but I will be just there to enjoy, which is Christmas caroling. So our neighborhood does that. There's a group that goes through on a hayride trailer and they sing Christmas carols, and a few of my kids are joining in that, but I am gonna contribute by making some healthy drinks to share because if I sing, it would definitely not bring the spirit of anything nice or Christmas to anyone. Definitely not my talent.

So, those are some of our Christmas traditions and things that we've celebrated this year. And also, we do fun things, like, the day on Christmas, we just stay in pajamas all day and enjoy family time. And even though that we're in pajamas and it's all family, we also usually have company and it's just fun to have lots of shared time together. And that I'm sure the kids will be running all over the neighborhood come rain or shine. And to me, those are the moments that really make Christmas and life special.

And like I said, I would love to hear yours no matter what background you come from or what kind of traditions you have or whatever you celebrate or don't celebrate. I'd love to hear it. So, please leave a comment on the blog at wellnessmama.fm, or leave an honest rating or review of the podcast. I'd love to hear about your family as well and any fun traditions that you have this time of year or any time of year.

And again, as I said in the beginning, I'm so, so, so grateful for all of you who shared this mission of creating healthier lives for our families and it's amazing to me, the strength that we have in numbers, and the changes that are actually happening. And it's truly awe-inspiring to see, even in the last few years, the big changes that have happened from people like you guys, you moms, and you families being on the front lines and just making baby steps in choosing healthier things for our families. And big companies are taking notice, and there's more organic options in the grocery store than even just a few years ago, and certainly, more than when I started blogging. So, thank you all of you for all your baby steps and hard work in everything you guys do every day, and for listening.

I know that time is our most valuable resource, and I'm truly honored that you would spend some time with me on this podcast or reading any blog articles. So I just appreciate you and I am grateful for you, and I hope you have wonderful happy holidays and many great moments with family and friends. And like I said, please let me know how you celebrate because I'd love to here. Merry Christmas.

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