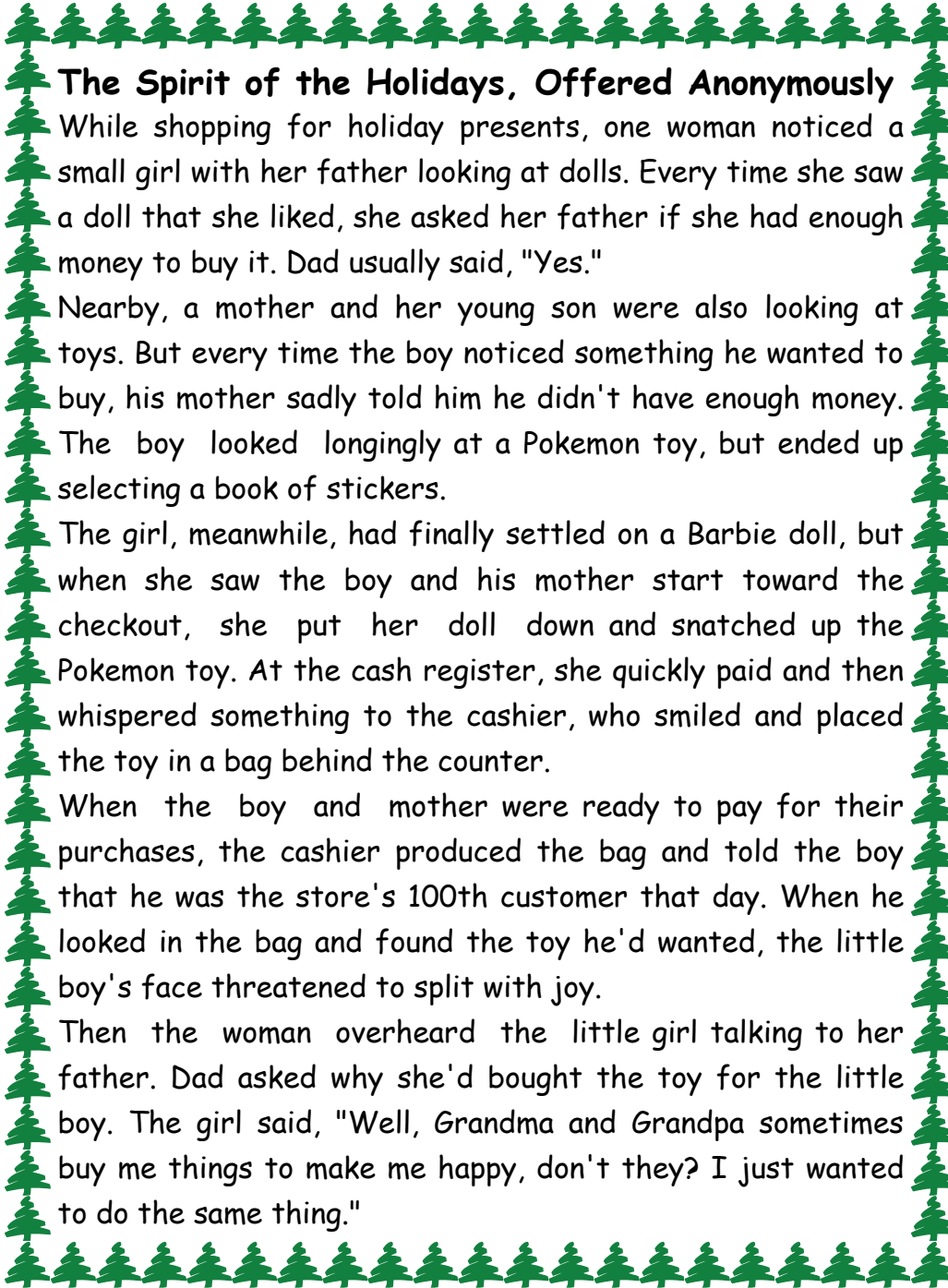




This newsletter contains a collection of relevant educational articles.



## The Spirit of the Holidays, Offered Anonymously

While shopping for holiday presents, one woman noticed a small girl with her father looking at dolls. Every time she saw a doll that she liked, she asked her father if she had enough money to buy it. Dad usually said, "Yes."

Nearby, a mother and her young son were also looking at toys. But every time the boy noticed something he wanted to buy, his mother sadly told him he didn't have enough money.

The boy looked longingly at a Pokemon toy, but ended up selecting a book of stickers.

The girl, meanwhile, had finally settled on a Barbie doll, but when she saw the boy and his mother start toward the checkout, she put her doll down and snatched up the Pokemon toy. At the cash register, she quickly paid and then whispered something to the cashier, who smiled and placed the toy in a bag behind the counter.

When the boy and mother were ready to pay for their purchases, the cashier produced the bag and told the boy that he was the store's 100th customer that day. When he looked in the bag and found the toy he'd wanted, the little boy's face threatened to split with joy.

Then the woman overheard the little girl talking to her father. Dad asked why she'd bought the toy for the little boy. The girl said, "Well, Grandma and Grandpa sometimes buy me things to make me happy, don't they? I just wanted to do the same thing."

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## A Bountiful Spectrum of Celebrations

December is a month of celebrations and holidays that span many different countries and cultures. Don't miss out on any of them. Here's a guide to what your friends and neighbors are up to this month:

**Hanukkah.** The eight-day Jewish holiday begins this year at sundown the day before December 2, 2010 (because the traditional Jewish calendar begins at sunset). Hanukkah marks the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem following the Jews' victory in 165 B.C.

According to the Talmud, the Jews had only enough olive oil to keep the eternal flame in the Temple burning for a single day--but miraculously, the oil continued to burn for eight days, during which time the Jews were able to produce and consecrate fresh oil for the flame.

Hanukkah is observed by the lighting of a nine-branched candelabrum, called a menorah. One candle is lit each of the eight nights, with a central candle lit each night to light the others.

**Al Hijra.** The Islamic new year observed on December 7, 2010--the first day of the month of Muharram, when the prophet Muhammad and his followers emigrated from Mecca to the city now known as Medina in the year 622. Several years earlier Muhammad had advised some Muslims to leave Mecca to escape persecution, but remained there himself until growing hostility prompted him to relocate.

Hijra means "migration" in Arabic, and is related to the Latin *hegira*, which also refers to a journey or migration.

The Islamic new year is not marked by religious rituals or observances, but many Muslims use the occasion to reflect on the past and future, as well as the original Hijra itself.

**Christmas.** This Christian holiday celebrates the birth of Jesus, sometime between the years 7 and 2 B.C. The word Christmas comes from Christ's Mass, a phrase first recorded in old English as *Cristes mæsse* in 1038.

Christmas began to be observed with feasts and celebrations in the Middle Ages--the online encyclopedia Wikipedia notes that King Richard II of England hosted a Christmas feast in 1377, with twenty-eight oxen and three hundred sheep eaten.

The colonial Puritans of New England disapproved of Christmas celebrations, which were banned during the 17th century. But other colonists observed the day with Christmas trees and nativity scenes. President Ulysses S. Grant signed the law making Christmas a federal holiday in 1870.

**Kwanzaa.** A seven-day celebration of African heritage and culture observed from December 26 to January 1. Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by activist Ron Karenga to provide African Americans with a holiday that emphasized their shared history and experience. The name Kwanzaa is derived from "matunda ya kwanza," a Swahili phrase meaning "first fruits."

Houses are decorated with African art and colorful cloth, and seven candles are placed in the kinara, a candleholder. The central candle in the kinara is black, with three red candles on the left and four green candles on the right.

The candles represent the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. As one of the candles is lit each day, observers are invited to contemplate the principles.

A decorative border of green wreaths with red bows surrounds the text.

## Improve Communications with Parents

A good principal learns to use many forms of communication throughout the year to reach the biggest percentage of parents. There are many ways to reach out, so make sure you're not using just the same old stand-bys. Here are a few that can be easily and inexpensively implemented:

- **One-on-one or small group coffees and lunches.** This is a great way to get out of your office and hear from people. Have them weekly or monthly. Randomly select parents or have your parent-teacher or Booster club organize them.
- **Electronic or printed newsletter.** Make them short, simple, and to-the-point, and be sure they go out the same day every time. Give the newsletter a name. Make sure it communicates special activities, a calendar of events, anything new and exciting coming up, and opportunities for parent involvement.
- **YouTube.** If you aren't camera shy, make a podcast. Use a free YouTube account to post it and add short videos from school and class events that parents weren't able to attend. Let them know through your newsletter or website that the video is available.
- **Survey their thoughts.** Use an online survey company or just the old fashioned paper kind. See what's on parents' minds about their children's education or the school overall.
- **Weekly folder.** In lower level classes, make sure a weekly envelope or folder of students' papers and information is carried home to parents. Send it consistently on the same day every week.
- **Suggestion box.** It may be old-fashioned to some, but anonymous tips might be the best. Keep one handy in the office at all times, and take the time to go through it. Whether it's a change in the school cafeteria or an idea on how to make the curriculum stronger, your students and parents might have great insight.
- **Open door policy.** Make sure parents know that you are available to talk or listen. Set hours when you are in the office just for parents.



## Encouraging Creativity

All children are born with an innate creativity that helps them learn and grow. Creativity is more than just talent or artistic ability; it's a person's ability to express his or her own uniqueness. In order to allow children to continue to express their creativity we, too, have to be a little creative.

### At home:

- Limit the amount of time spent in front of the television or playing video games. It's great to relax and enjoy TV programs, but they provide very little creative inspiration. Video games may also be fun, but they are unlikely to inspire children to explore their own uniqueness.
- Encourage your children to read books geared to their age levels and limits. Librarians can suggest popular and fun books for your children.
- Let small children color on plain paper instead of using coloring books. This allows them the freedom to express themselves without having to worry about "getting it right" or staying inside the lines.
- Play different types of music at home. You may think they're not paying attention, but being exposed to varying stimuli, including music, can encourage creativity.

### At school:

- Play storytelling games. The teacher can open the story and then allow all of the children an opportunity to help determine the outcome. The children will feel like they are controlling the creation of the story, and as long as their contributions stay within the bounds of good taste, you can let their imaginations run free.
- Provide regular trips outside the school to simply observe nature. It could just be a short walk to a nearby park or a longer day trip to a conservation area. Any place where children can see nature as a creative force will help them free their own creativity. Any time of year is a great time to get outside.
- Allow unstructured and unrestricted "free" time. Children's schedules can be incredibly busy as they balance their school and homework with sports, clubs, and home life. It's not only relaxing for them to take breaks, it allows them to explore new things they might not have been able to try before. Just make sure that they don't use up all their free time in front of the television.

Finally here's a few "don'ts" about encouraging children's creativity.

- Don't put children's creativity under a microscope; let them be creative with a minimum of supervision.
- Don't use creative activities as a competition.
- Don't judge their creations. Every drawing is perfect to a child.
- Don't apply any pressure; let them feel that whatever they do in this area is just fine with you, as long as they express their own identity.



## Are You Really Listening?

For better relations with others, avoid these listening mistakes:

- **Discounting the issue.** We minimize the importance of what another person has said. Saying, "Oh, it's not that big of a deal," can make another feel that you think his or her concerns are trivial. The intent of a response should be to support and encourage.
- **Offering unwanted advice.** When you jump in to tell the other person what to do, you may be solving the wrong problem without understanding all the issues. You may also send the message that you don't think the speaker is capable of solving his or her own problems. Give advice only when asked.
- **Interrogating the person.** We often respond to a problem by analyzing it--asking a lot of probing questions and judging the other person's response. Be careful--don't alienate the person with too many questions and interruptions. Let him or her finish before searching for solutions.



## Re-assessing Homework

Frequently, kids would rather be doing just about anything else instead of homework. But while teachers have problems getting students motivated to do homework parents complain their children have too much.

What's the solution? The book, *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs* by Cathy Vatterott addresses some solutions that just might work to address both the pro- and anti-homework controversy. She believes the best approach is not to eliminate homework altogether, but to focus more on a new model that eliminates long-standing cultural beliefs about homework.

In the past, people just assumed homework would get done because of work ethic and engrained morals. Now we realize that we need to motivate students. Vatterott suggests that educators design quality homework tasks; differentiate homework tasks; deemphasize grading of homework; emphasize homework completion; and implement homework strategies and support programs.

To help improve the percentage of homework getting completed and done well, teachers have come up with several strategies:

- Assign one assignment or one subject per night.
- Discuss the assignment and give students a few minutes to begin the assignment in class.
- Avoid giving homework right at the end of the class period when students aren't focused or listening very well.
- Provide peer tutors or study groups.
- Supply homework packets or lists of weekly or monthly assignments. Make them available online too.
- Give all assignments for the next week on Friday, due the next Friday.



## Organize and Prioritize

It's not always easy to get organized and assure that you accomplish everything you need to do in any given day. Sometimes it means re-working everything--starting with the time you set your alarm in the morning--and coming up with a routine that will best address all the things you are responsible for on a routine basis.

It's best to break down the areas of life that need addressing into small, manageable parts. This will allow you to work things out without feeling overwhelmed. If you believe you are too busy to even get organized, chances are you already have too many things on your plate.

Try these suggestions:

- Don't neglect your home life for work, and vice versa. If one is disorganized, it will affect the other.
- Sort incoming mail, paperwork, and emails immediately. Don't let them pile up and become big projects.
- When you're too busy to handle everything on your plate, delegate. Don't feel that you must do everything yourself. You may be pleasantly surprised to find out you have some very capable "assistants."
- Always put things back where they belong and tidy up at the end of the day. Time won't be wasted searching for things you need if they're where they belong.
- Consolidate your time. Return emails and phone calls during a pre-set time every day. Check emails only a few times a day instead of on and off constantly. Group errands and trips to the copier or storage room together so you don't take several little trips.
- Write lists and prioritize them. Whether at the end of the day or the start of the day, take a few minutes to jot down what you need to get done and stick to it.
- Whatever routine you come up with, always include time for yourself. It will go a long way toward lowering your stress and gaining perspective.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS**

