

Irene Shere, Educational and Family Consultant  
The Early Childhood Consultation Center  
Bethesda and Washington, DC  
301-652-6166  
IreneECCC@aol.com

### **A Special Holiday Gift: The Gift of Reality**

Last November, as I eagerly anticipated my college daughter's return home at Thanksgiving, I was daydreaming about four peaceful and happy days of family togetherness. Then, in the middle of presenting a parent workshop on Anger Management, while speaking about how parents' angry feelings often derive from unmet expectations, I realized I was about to make that exact mistake. My expectations for my daughter's Thanksgiving homecoming were totally unrealistic. In the seventeen years of our intense relationship, my daughter and I had rarely had four uninterrupted days of peaceful and happy family togetherness, so how could that possibly happen this Thanksgiving? I suddenly realized how I was setting myself up to be angry and disappointed. I revised my holiday daydream to include one conflict per day. On Thanksgiving weekend my daughter came home and our fine time together, along with only two conflicts, left me feeling content.

The holidays can be such a stressful and ultra-stimulating time for children and adults that lowering our expectations for ourselves and our families, rather than trying to match reality to daydreams, seems a more satisfying approach. Expecting a temper tantrum from a preschooler on Christmas Day, and maybe even taking bets with a spouse as to when, introduces some distance and a sense of humor into the situation. Anticipating that the children may fight over who gets to light the Hannukah candles and perhaps developing a strategy to deal with this beforehand keeps this behavior from spoiling the holidays. Knowing in advance that the excitement of a Kwanzaa celebration may leave a young child in tears will help a parent prepare for coping with that situation. Appreciating that we adults also have a finite amount of energy can help us monitor how we may be contributing to some of our difficulties with our children, such as complaining about children's table manners at Thanksgiving dinner rather than admitting our own exhaustion.

After years of hoping otherwise, I finally realized that our family would never have a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving dinner—unless Rockwell painted in a plate of chicken nuggets next to the gleaming turkey and showed my young son agonizing to stay in his seat for more than two minutes. When I realized that our family Hannukah celebrations re-enacting the ancient “eight-day miracle” included some nights never celebrated and some nights celebrated double, I had to accept our family for its holiday inconsistencies. When I finally realized that we would never have a Currier & Ives Christmas—unless Currier and Ives frantically rushed their tree home at 7:30pm Christmas Eve to decorate it—I began appreciating our harried tree-trimming as a unique family traditions. And when I realized that I never escaped the holidays without a major temper tantrum myself, I decided to name it “Mom's Holiday Horror” and my loving family laughs about this, too, as a unique part of our holiday rituals.

And somewhere, in the lowering of expectations and acceptance of reality, I have found that a magical holiday present appears. There is no expensive foil wrap, there are no perfect ribbons,. Embracing my family as we really are—that is the most precious and the most special gift of all.

© Irene Shere, 1993