

The Best of Both Worlds

Guest Writer: Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert

As the end-of-year holiday period starts, we find ourselves drawn into the past with memories of childhood Christmases, Thanksgivings or New Year parties. This can sometimes cause problems in bilingual and bicultural families when parents try to re-create their previous happy holidays. As a mixed culture family we can either follow one parent's culture exclusively or blend the two cultures into a unique tradition.

Some parents might feel ambivalent or uninterested in their own heritage because they may have moved far away or converted to another religion. Other parents enthusiastically take up their partner's culture as their own and give all their energy to supporting it, forgetting their heritage. This often happens to parents living in another country where their culture is not accessible. One Japanese/English family I knew, who lived in England, had been busy celebrating English holidays, until the mother set up a Japanese-speaking playgroup and with other mothers began celebrating significant dates such as Girls Day in the spring.

In our French/English household we have a similar cultural background and are both Christians, but we celebrate Christmas very differently. In the beginning when the children were tiny we spent alternate Christmases with each family. However Jacques found the fuss over decorating the house excessive, was not impressed by the traditional English Christmas day roast turkey lunch and refused to sing along with the carol-singing! In France I was surprised that we ate a big meal of fresh seafood on Christmas Eve (when I would normally go to church) and confused when, at midnight, we put the gifts on each persons slippers, not in socks as we do in England! No - one thought to leave a snack for Rudolph either!

When we began celebrating Christmas at our house, we made a few choices based on what the kids liked best. It ended up with me and the kids decorating the house as we wish for a whole month and loudly singing carols. We usually invite friends for a mid-December lunch of turkey and cranberry sauce starter, lamb as the main course and Christmas pudding and brandy sauce. On Christmas Eve we put out both socks and slippers, just in case, and leave a treat for the reindeer. We usually go away for the two weeks holiday and so are away from either culture and just relax and enjoy the magic of Christmas together.

Some tips for bicultural blends...

Respect your partner's cultural heritage and don't try to belittle or criticize it, what you think is unimportant might have much meaning for him or her.

Don't try to re-create your or your partner's cultural heritage exactly – instead form a new tradition in your household.

Let children be involved in picking the best of both worlds, and do what is fun for all of you.

Don't assume your kids will know about your culture if you are living away from it - you will need to explain the reasons, what you do and how it affects them.

Invite friends to see how you celebrate certain festivals that are not feted in your country.

Teach your kids about your culture through preparing for your festivals – enjoy cooking, decorating and making cards/invitations together and talk about your childhood memories.

Enjoy the fact you have more things to celebrate and have fun!

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert is the author of *Language Strategies for Bilingual Families: The One-Parent-One Language Approach* (see book details in "Lizard Recommends" section). Suzanne is married to a Frenchman and lives in Chicago with her three bilingual children. Her website is <http://www.opol4us.com>.

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