



## *AMC Montessori Fall/Winter 2011 Hands-On Creative Lesson Planning Newsletter*

*Sara L. Ambarian*

*Copyright 2011*

*All Rights Reserved*

Website:

<http://condortales.com/bridestouch.html>



*Article by Sara L. Ambarian*

### **Re-thinking Holiday Priorities During Tough Times**

I originally wrote this article in the fall of 2010 for American Montessori Consulting's Fall/Winter Hands-On Learning Newsletter. In the year since it was originally published, it is clear that many families have found themselves in even tighter circumstances than before; so I was asked to resubmit the article this year.

Recent Gallup poll results show that economic pressures are continuing to cause emotional stresses for many Americans. In August, the percentage of people polled who were worried about cutbacks or reductions at their jobs is *double* what it was in 2008 and about the same as it was in 2009, though numbers had been a

little more optimistic last year.

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/149261/Worries-Job-Cutbacks-Return-Record-Highs.aspx>

In the same time period, 75% of people polled felt that the economic outlook was “getting worse”, with only 20% thinking it is “getting better”.

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/110824/Gallup-Daily-US-Economic-Outlook.aspx>

Of those polled in August, 52% felt that economic conditions are “poor”, as opposed to only 9% who think they’re “excellent/good”.

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/110821/Gallup-Daily-US-Economic-Conditions.aspx>

Like last year, I am not surprised. I have continued to have conversations with family, friends and even strangers about how grateful we are to have a steady job, an affordable home, a dependable car, reasonably good health, help caring for an aging parent, some scholarship money for a son or daughter in college, a little extra food in the pantry, and/or a little extra money in the bank. Even in tough times, there is always much to be thankful for. May you make the most of whatever your current situation offers.

Coping during tough times always takes creativity, grit, commitment, patience. It usually also requires a sense of humor; but often it is much harder to cope during the holidays than at other times of the year. We have many hopes and expectations for the holidays; and often feel many pressures, as well, especially if we have children. It can also be a time when socializing and spending situations can be considerably more competitive than in our day-to-day lives. How you dress for parties, how you decorate your home, what you bring to a family dinner, and even what gifts you buy can sometimes come under scrutiny. Those who truly love and respect us do not judge us by these criteria, of course; but many other people around us may (or may seem to us to be doing so), which may cause additional stress during hard times.

The good news, of course, is that much of how we experience life is controlled by how we see it. Although we cannot control some circumstances in our lives, we can control how we react to them. If you are feeling concerned or discouraged about facing the holiday season, perhaps some of the following comments will give you ideas and perspective to make your holidays less stressful and more meaningful.

### *Prioritizing and/or simplifying holiday activities*

If there isn’t enough money, energy, and/or time this year to buy or do everything you normally would, then don’t try to do it all. This sounds obvious, but many of us struggle with this concept. Of all the many events and expenditures during the holidays, not all of them are equally important or enjoyable. Prioritize all your

normal traditions and this year's invitations, and make some choices, focusing your resources on those that give you and your family the most joy. Perhaps that means declining an invitation or two to give you more rest or family time. Perhaps it means buying one or two special gifts for each family member, rather than a lot of extraneous gifts "just because". Perhaps it means wearing the Christmas outfit you got compliments on a year or two ago, rather than buying something new. Perhaps it means skipping a particularly time-consuming and/or expensive tradition to take off some stress and/or financial pressure.

You can always choose to make different choices next holiday season, based on whatever conditions are when that time comes. You need to do what will work for you now, and there is no shame in doing so. It's the practical, logical way to make the most of the holidays, and to keep stress and money worries from ruining your enjoyment of them.

On the other hand, you might actually find that a slower pace and simpler celebrations have a charm you enjoy. There are many books and websites devoted to simplifying our lives, and I think it is because many of us have fit about as much "stuff" (belongings, activities, achievements, etc.) into our lives as we can. It seems natural that, at some point, we might feel the need and/or desire to let the pendulum swing back a bit the other way, and re-evaluate what all the activities and belongings really give us – and if they are worth the price we pay.

### *Learning to say "no" when appropriate*

An important part of restructuring priorities for many people is to take control of your decision-making process by learning when to say "no". Whether it's declining some parties or gift exchanges, adjusting your children's gift expectations, resisting peer pressure and competitiveness in decorations and entertaining, or finding the limit of your resources and looking for help with some of your responsibilities, there are times when you need to be ready, willing and able to set practical limits without guilt. Many of us have been on an upward spiral of more and more events, gifts, responsibilities and obligations for the holidays every year. If you have been one of those people, it may be time to step back a little.

If saying "no" is particularly hard for you, you might also want to think a little bit about why that is. Do you tend to underestimate how busy you are? Do you fear offending someone? Do you feel guilty if you do not participate or help out whenever you are asked? Do you feel that you are the only one who can do whatever it is? Does it make you self-conscious to skip an event due to financial reasons? Recognizing why you are over-extending yourself is often a good first

step in figuring out when and how you might be happier saying “no”.

### Managing expectations and accepting limitations graciously

Around our house, a favorite saying is “Expectations are everything” – basically meaning that most things in life aren’t a big problem unless you really had your heart set on them being a different way than they end up. In tough times, this is especially true. If you have a very specific set of parameters of what makes a “good” holiday season, a “good” vacation, a “good” job, etc., it is obviously much more likely that you could be down and disappointed if you need to scale back in one of those areas. It is fun to anticipate and plan for upcoming events; but if your expectations are unrealistic, even a wonderful event will struggle to satisfy you.

Often a more productive approach is to try to focus on the “givens” of any upcoming event, rather than elaborate details. For a holiday gathering, for example, rather than setting your heart on each guest you want to come, every cooking success, or a specific desired present, you might choose to concentrate on the enjoyment of seeing loved ones and spending time together. Then, if certain guests cannot come, some dish fails, or Santa is unable to provide the “perfect” gift, you leave yourself open to both the general joys and the unexpected treats of the occasion. Expect to have fun, but perhaps adopt a “wait and see” attitude about exactly how that “fun” will play out.

When times are especially tough, and you know that things will have to be different than you would like or normally expect, you may need to take managing expectations to the next level – accepting limitations graciously. At times in our lives we find ourselves in situations where all the wanting and wishing in the world is not going to change things. It is out of our hands.

At that point, you have two choices – you can be disappointed or angry, or you can accept that things are as they are, at least for now, and move on. Accepting the reality of your current situation reduces the amount of power that circumstance has over your emotions and limits the time and energy that could be wasted lamenting it. Of course you can and should do all you can to improve or make the most of any situation in your life. However, skipping the “pity party” (or keeping it short and directed), looking at your situation realistically, and working with it will keep you moving in a positive and productive direction, instead of stalled in frustration or anger.

### Modeling honest gratitude

For a combination of reasons, gratitude seems to be a character trait that is much

less common in our society than it once was. As citizens, and especially as parents, I think some of us need to be reminded how fortunate most of us actually are. Even in the worst of contemporary times, most of us have many blessings and benefits to appreciate in our lives. Yet it seems to be almost trendy now to focus on the negatives in our lives and society in general. Certainly all of us have our share (and sometimes more) of troubles and frustrations; but, in general, complaining about or concentrating on those only wastes our time and energy.

It is also important to look at how all this negativity affects our families, especially our children. Grumbling and looking at the downside of life tends to create a stressful atmosphere in our homes, where we most want to feel relaxed and happy. We all have to deal with and endure problems, but belaboring them only makes them seem worse than they are. More important, in my opinion, constant negativity and self-pity teach our children to look at the negative, too. In effect we “model” a bad attitude as appropriate and normal. What a shame, when displaying a realistic, grateful attitude about our blessings – and helping our kids see and appreciate the positives in their lives – can help them lead happier lives and be more productive citizens.

Some children are blessed with gratitude as a natural personality trait, but more often you see it most strongly in kids from homes where a positive attitude is purposely cultivated and ungrateful behaviors are actively discouraged. At the very least, we can all hope that by setting a good example and emphasizing positive attitude and appreciation within our homes, we are giving our children an alternative model to the societal negativity all around them.

#### *Making good use of time, energy and money*

With our attitudes in order, we are better able (and probably also more willing) to make good choices about how to use our resources most practically. Whether you find time, energy, money -- or all three – tight, you can probably make any or all of them stretch farther by planning ahead and making prudent decisions.

Keep your eyes open for free events and entertainment. Local libraries, churches and schools often host free or inexpensive holiday events for children and adults. Many Christmas tree farms have holiday festivities besides just tree-cutting you can enjoy. One of our family’s favorite free holiday “entertainment” sources in our area is non-stop holiday radio for several weeks to a month before Christmas Day. You can also find a wide variety of holiday music streams on the internet to get and keep you in the mood.

Try to be more aware of the timing of your errands, and plan to be able to eat at home more often instead of in restaurants. Just this one change in planning can save many of us quite a bit of money we could then spend on other, more important holiday expenditures. Thinking ahead and combining errands can also save time, stress and money, if you are used to making many single-errand trips around town.

You might also try to see if you can coordinate with other family members to buy holiday food staples (flour, sugar, butter, meat, etc.) in bulk at a warehouse or restaurant supply store, and split them. This can give each of you the benefit of a much lower “per ounce” or “per pound” price without having to store all of the bulk purchase yourselves. You could also consider buying bulk for your own family and making room for the extra. Having extra stock of staples on-hand makes daily cooking much easier, and it can also be a comfort for many kinds of emergency situations.

You could also plan ahead and start early to make some of your gifts yourself, rather than buying all of them. Home-made gifts do take time, but also usually save money; and often a much smaller, simpler hand-made gift means as much as a larger, more expensive store-bought gift to the recipient. They usually carry more meaning, are often more personalized, and show the recipient that you were thinking of them far enough in advance to take the time to make something special.

Pretty much everyone has some skill or talent that can be used to make some sort of a gift. It only takes a little thought and creativity to decide what your talents, time, and budget will allow.

Art, craft, sewing or needlework skills are obvious gift-making talents. With standard shop tools and some do-it-yourself experience, you might be able to make wood or metal gifts for home or garden. If you like to cook, look for recipes for food or personal care items. If you love books or music, you could “package” an appropriate famous quotation or piece of music into a personalized gift – a quotation or lyrics framed or printed on a bookmark, music burned on a CD, etc. Christmas tree ornaments are another type of gift that can be easy and inexpensive, with an almost endless variety of materials and skills used to make them. Especially when marked with the year they were made, these ornaments can become beloved heirlooms.

If you are reading this on a computer, you have an amazing array of ideas and resources at your fingertips. All you need is a couple of key words and a little

patience. See reference links at the end of this article for a few resources. Also visit your local library for many more ideas.

### *Re-thinking practical gifts*

It has certainly been out of style to give (or to be happy to receive!) practical gifts for quite a while now. Perhaps you have seen the e-mail showing all the ads from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which show men giving their wives new stoves and other kitchen appliances as gifts. We modern women are clearly supposed to be offended, and I don't mind if you are (especially if you don't like to cook!) I do not happen to find them offensive, however. I have received – and loved– practical gifts many times. If you need or want something, and it will make your day-to-day life easier, I think it can be a great gift – even if it is not soft and fuzzy, or sparkling. A bottle of perfume to go WITH the pressure cooker or dehydrator is nice, of course, when possible, but it is not always necessary.

When finances are tight, using needed “bigger ticket” items as gifts makes a lot of sense, especially if you really cannot afford to buy much else. During the holidays, you might even find them on sale. Smaller practical items like clothing or tools can also be good investments during tough times. Is a bag of tube socks an exciting gift? Maybe not, unless many of your old socks have holes in them. It's often a matter of perspective. In the past, socks, shoes, pajamas, “long-johns”, winter coats, and “Sunday best” clothing were all common Christmas gifts. Bed linens were also popular, because they're something you do not buy often, but do sometimes need to replace or replenish. In some families, these are still popular choices today, and for good reason.

If you have not considered giving practical gifts in the past, perhaps now is a good time to re-think them as a possibility. Maybe this year, instead of looking for the expensive “special occasion” gift – the fancy china serving piece, the “wear-once-and-put-in-the-closet” outfit, the elaborate jewelry, or the trendy electronic gadget – it makes more sense to buy something practical for the kitchen, an outfit that can be worn at work or school, pretty costume jewelry, a romantic book or CD or DVD, or a useful accessory or tool for home or auto use.

Remember, you can choose smaller, practical items with flair and thoughtfulness, just as you would a larger, fancier gift. Clothing and accessory items come in all colors, styles and fabrics. Small appliances and tools have different quality and features. Many pieces of affordable jewelry are beautiful and distinctive. The options in books, music and movies are nearly limitless for any taste or interests. There are also oodles of options in personal care products like soaps, lotions, scent

items, etc. Smaller, more practical gifts also may allow you to afford a couple of nice things for a spouse or child, rather than spending your whole budget on one item. If you package these smaller, practical gifts attractively and creatively, sometimes that also makes them more special.

One other type of practical gift that is good for tough times is the sort of gift that, though it may cost a little bit initially, can give you and your family continued cheap fun and togetherness throughout the year.

For example, if your family likes to go out to the movies, you know how expensive that can be. Perhaps you could decide to wait just a little longer for first-run movies, and watch them at home on pay-per-view, Netflix or another movie rental service. Invest a little money in fancy popcorn and/or a popper (how about one you can use in your fireplace, for extra fun?) plus some theater-style bowls or buckets to put it in. Pick up your favorite candy, snacks and/or soda in multi-packs at a warehouse store. Make movie night a specific weekly or monthly event, and you could save lots of money over time, be more comfortable than in a movie theater (especially if you have young, active children), and still have a festive movie experience.

To make this a “gift”, you could put the popcorn and popper, bowls or buckets, candy and snacks, soda, and either a favorite DVD or something which indicates an upcoming movie you want to watch all together into a basket or box. You might even make up a home-made banner or sign you can put up which tells when it is “movie night”. Something like this can be a combination of both the “gift” and a whole new thrifty-but-fun tradition for your family.

### *Thinking of others*

Life is full of opportunities to go a little bit out of your way to give a gift of kindness to both loved ones and strangers; and what better time to spread kindness and thoughtfulness than during the holidays. If you have ever looked a store clerk in the eye and smiled when you say “thank you” to them for helping you find a needed item, or if you’ve held open a door for someone with their hands full at a store or the post office – or if you have been on the receiving end of this sort of action – you know what it means. Simple courtesies go a long way with most people.

Keep this in mind when considering holiday gifts during tough times. You don’t always need to spend a lot of money or make a lot of fuss to show someone you care. In our comparatively affluent modern times, there are not that many material

goods most of us need anyway; but often we do lack important less-tangible things like companionship, community, and support.

So, never underestimate the value of your time and talents, especially for the elderly, lonely or ill. Make a phone call. Write a chatty letter or e-mail (or offer to help address Christmas cards, a big job for many elderly folks). Share your dinner, part of a batch of cookies, or a ride to the grocery store. Offer to sweep the porch, run the vacuum, hang some laundry, or wash a sinkful of dishes. Are you handy around the house? Ask if there are any little repairs that need to be done – light bulbs changed, hinges oiled, firewood stacked – or maybe you could shovel snow, prune trees or shrubs, or mow the lawn. Are you blessed with “grease monkey” skills? Auto services are expensive and often time-consuming. Maybe someone you know would be helped if you could wash the car, change the oil, or perform some small repair service. To someone who needs the help, this will probably mean much more than any store-bought gift you might find for them.

### *Keeping perspective*

With all the talk the past two years about the state of our economy, as bad as things are for many of us, it is still worthwhile to consider our blessings as well as our trials. Most of us who are young to middle-aged have had fairly prosperous lives compared to those of our grandparents. The scarcities and scrimping of the Great Depression and the war years, for us, are only stories we have perhaps heard. The “traveling light” and “living off the land” of pioneer times seems like a completely different world. Still, our ancestors had very happy Christmases, probably partly because they appreciated “the little things”.

If you are feeling discouraged about the holidays, you and your children might enjoy chatting with an elderly family member or neighbor. I imagine that their reminiscences will be a poignant reminder of how fortunate we all are, as tough as times are for many of us right now. They also illustrate how little it can take to celebrate and be happy. The links below can get you started.

Excellent short articles about Christmas throughout American history:

<http://www.history.org/almanack/life/xmas/customs.cfm>

<http://www.suite101.com/content/christmas-little-house-style-a74914>

<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-christmas.html>

Memories of Christmas traditions and gifts during the Great Depression:.

[http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2008/12/fruits\\_of\\_the\\_great\\_depression.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2008/12/fruits_of_the_great_depression.html)

Another way to get your attitude in order about your holiday season is to consider our military stationed overseas. Cutting back on presents, opting for a cut-your-own pine or fir tree rather than an imported blue spruce, skipping a party or gift exchange, etc., are all small concessions to hard times. Compare these “sacrifices” to spending Christmas far from home and family, in danger and in uncomfortable circumstances. Of course, for most of us, there is no comparison.

Perhaps you could help your family appreciate your blessings by reaching out to our military men and women who are giving up time with their families and friends and risking their safety in order to keep us safe here at home. Here are just a few contacts from programs nationwide.

*Touch of Home Support 4R Deployed Military, Inc.*, a southern California 501c3 Community Service Corporation, is a wonderful operation I have contributed to for a number of years. Check their website for details on how to help, especially the Adopt a Box program. They try to mail 100-150 boxes every week, and most of the Christmas boxes need to be mailed by Thanksgiving. Consider starting your holiday early by remembering one of these hardworking military members with some care from home. It means so much to them!

<http://touchofhomeformilitary.com/>

*Let's Say "Thanks"*—on-line card service. Easy, fast and free. They provide a wide variety of standardized messages you can add to your card, or you can write your own.

<http://www.letsaythanks.com/Home1024.html>

Red Cross' Christmas card program for wounded military.

<http://www.redcross.org/holidaymail>

Like Laura Ingalls Wilder, I tend to think that every Christmas is better than the one before, no matter what is going on in my family's life, finances, etc. at the time. Perhaps this is because with maturity I appreciate my many blessings more. Perhaps it is because I see every year going by faster than the year before, and I don't want to waste a moment of time with my family.

In any case, for me, it has never been about what we had in the way of material goods or entertainment that made the holidays special. It has always been the feeling of sharing WHATEVER we have with our family and friends with love and goodwill. I hope that whatever your circumstance this holiday season, you will also focus on the positive and fully enjoy both the feeling and the meaning of the

season.

~~~~~  
*Making good use of time, energy and money*

Lots of thrifty family fun can often be found at your local Christmas tree farm.

<http://www.pickyourownchristmastree.org/>

Can't wait for Christmas, have some harvest-time fun now!

<http://www.pickyourown.org/index.htm>

To find a wealth of craft ideas, search for "holiday craft projects" in your favorite search engine. Add a specific craft name ("crochet", "plastic canvas", "polymer clay", etc.) for narrower results.

### Woodworking gift projects

<http://www.newwoodworker.com/holidaygiftproj.html>

Find a wide variety of food gift ideas like these from your own kitchen, including mix-in-a-jar, seasoning, and dry or wet rub recipes. Many sites also include ideas about packaging these recipes for gift presentation.

<http://www.recipe.com/search/?searchTerm=dry%20rub>

<http://www.cdktichen.com/recipes/cat/9/>

### Natural Hair Care Product Recipes

<http://www.longlocks.com/hair-care-recipes-cookbook.htm>

### Quotations, classical and modern.

<http://www.bartleby.com/100/>

<http://www.quoteland.com/topic.asp>

Several examples of a single type of home-made gift project, bookmarks.

<http://www.origami-resource-center.com/books-and-bookmarks.html>

<http://www.artistshelpingchildren.org/bookmarksartsandcraftsideaskids.html>

<http://tipnut.com/make-bookmarks/>

### *Re-thinking practical gifts*

#### Popcorn and poppers

<http://non-electric.lehmans.com/search#w=popcorn&asug=popcorn>

<http://www.amishcountrypopcorn.com/grillpopper.html>

#### Disposable popcorn buckets and bags like in theaters

<http://www.htmarket.com/popcorn-machines-and-popcorn-supplies-popcorn-supplies-popcorn-boxes.html>

<http://www.htmarket.com/popcorn-machines-and-popcorn-supplies-popcorn-supplies-popcorn-buckets-and-tubs.html>

#### Melamine or ceramic popcorn bowls and buckets

<http://www.sears.com/everybody-loves-5pc-pure-melamine-popcorn-set/p-02443852000P>

<http://www.abcdistributing.com/Harvest%2B2011/5-Pc.-Vintage-Movie-Popcorn-Set/prod290222.jsp?fm=catalog&navAction=jump&catalogBookId=2847&catalogId=catalog20019>

<http://custom-ceramic-stoneware.com/Popcorn.html>

\* \* \* \* \*

## *About Sara L. Ambarian*

*Copyright 2011*

*All Rights Reserved.*

Website: <http://condortales.com/bridestouch.html>

Sara L. Ambarian is an author, designer, illustrator, wife and mother with professional and personal experience in a wide range of subjects, including: arts and crafts, fashion, weddings, homeschooling, cooking, nature, and travel.

## *End of Part 8*

**Read the other parts of this creative hands-on lesson planning newsletter by visiting**

**[http://www.amonco.org/montessori\\_winter\\_handson.html](http://www.amonco.org/montessori_winter_handson.html)**

**Looking for additional hands-on lessons? Don't forget to read the companion newsletter. Just visit**

**[http://www.amonco.org/montessori\\_fall\\_handson.html](http://www.amonco.org/montessori_fall_handson.html)**

**Visit <http://www.amonco.org/> for additional lesson planning information.**