



## First Things First: Making Christ the Centerpiece of our Homeschools

by Beth Jones

*"The most important things in life aren't things." - Anthony J. D'Angelo, founder of The Collegiate EmPowerment Company and creator of The Inspiration Book Series*

When we set the table for the big family dinner at the holidays, we add extra touches to make it special for the occasion: grandma's antique china, real silverware, cloth napkins, and maybe some scented candles like pumpkin pie spice or gingerbread. But as everyone sits down to eat, the main decoration they notice is the centerpiece - often a decorative plate with a large, softly glowing candle in the center, surrounded with greenery, pinecones, and red cranberries.

As the holidays approach, we as homeschooling parents want to make sure that Christ is the "centerpiece" of God's banqueting table of love. There are the daily homeschool lessons, the chores to assign and to do, the menu planning, the grocery shopping for the big family dinner, our marriages to focus on, the shopping for gifts, the family and friends to invite over, the hours of cooking, and our businesses to run - all with a Christ-like attitude! What should our priority be during the holidays? Here are six tips to help you put first things first in your homeschool during the holidays this year.

- 1. The best place to start anything is on our knees.** Learn from Mary of Bethany. Her sister Martha was busy and distracted in the kitchen, fixing dinner for God who was in the next room. ☺ But Mary "chose the best part," the part that Jesus said would not be taken away from her. Jesus wasn't giving us permission to

be slackers and to shirk our housework (too bad!). He was emphasizing the importance of listening attentively to His words of life. As we make spending time with God our most important priority each day, these other necessary things will be taken care of by Him.

2. **Make your marriage matter, second to your relationship with God.** We have a limited amount of years to raise and to train our children, then they "fly the nest." Do you really want to look into the eyes of a distant stranger when they have moved out?

Yes, homeschooling our children is a great privilege and a joy, but our marriages are even more important than homeschooling. Be sure to take time each day to connect with your spouse in some way. This is especially important during the holidays, making sweet memories together.

Do the little things that add so much to a relationship. Honor your husband. Pray for him. Encourage him. He has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. I am thankful that my husband Ray works so hard as a paramedic to provide, so that I have the privilege of staying at home and homeschooling our daughter Leah. Set apart a date night for just the two of you, to keep the flames of passion alive in your marriage.

Strengthen your friendship with him. Continue to do fun things together with your spouse, like you did when you were dating. Go shopping together for the holiday meal or for gifts for the kids. Wrap presents together, playing Christmas carols. Enjoy a cup of hot cocoa or eggnog together late at night when the kids are in bed. And don't forget to kiss under the mistletoe! ☺ Yes, even watch *It's a Wonderful Life* with him again - just as you have done every year of your marriage, because it's his favorite holiday movie!

Let your children know that when dad and mom are "talking" in their bedroom **not** to interrupt (word of experience: invest in locks when you have little ones!). Working to create a happy, blessed marriage at the holidays will be one of the best gifts you could ever do for God, your family, and your homeschool.

3. **Planning will help you to avoid stress.** I am not rigid about our homeschool routine. I like to leave room in our schedule for spontaneous things that may come up, such as a homeschool co-op's holiday visit to a nursing home, shopping for gifts with family or friends, or visits from out-of-town relatives at Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Having some sort of plan will help you to alleviate a lot of frustration and chaos in your family's life, especially during the hectic holiday season.



If you oversleep until 10 a.m. from staying up too late from online holiday shopping the night before, the dishes are still in the sink with hardened food on them from last night's supper, and the kids are at the dining table with their books and your Snowman decorations scattered all over the table asking, "Okay, mom, what do we do first?", you know your life is a little out of control and that you need to set aside some time for better planning.

Whether you take aside an entire weekend alone at the beginning of the year to do yearly planning with your Bible, Dayplanner, or laptop, or you take one day a week to plan your children's schedule, or you are someone who flies by the seat of her pants and does daily planning (sort of - just before each subject!), be sure to have at least a sketch on paper for lesson plans, chores, dinner, etc.

Sticking to a schedule during the holidays can be difficult at times, but if you have something written or typed out as a guide and reminder, it will help reduce chaos - and might even preserve your sanity!

We have all heard the expression, "Aim at nothing, hit nothing!" Our children deserve our most focused attention for their education, because the responsibility of their future lies on our shoulders. We should take it seriously, and plan their lessons thoughtfully. It's easy to let lessons slide during the rushed holidays, but this is when we need to pray to God for discipline. "Lessons" may include baking, decorating, gift wrapping, and especially reading the Bible and family read-alouds. When your children are grown, you and they will have sweet memories of this time!

I use a Franklin Covey Dayplanner®, a calendar, and an online project management system, Manymoon (<https://www.manymoon.com/auth/login>), to organize my days.



I am also queen of sticky Post-It Notes.®

([http://www.post-it.com/wps/portal/3M/en\\_US/Post\\_It/Global/](http://www.post-it.com/wps/portal/3M/en_US/Post_It/Global/))

With Post-it notes, you can write down 3-5 priority tasks at hand, stick the note anywhere as a visual reminder, complete the tasks, and then when you finish them, simply crumble up the Post-it note and throw it away! (I love this part; it makes me feel good!) Others use their laptop, Ipad, or cell phone to do task management and to plan their schedule.

Whatever tool(s) you use, first seek God on what HIS desire is for you and your homeschool during the year and especially at the holidays! Be sure to make room for Christ and His agenda at this special time of year, such as helping at a soup kitchen or showing hospitality to guests. God may want to completely rearrange your schedule! Proverbs 16: 9 says, "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps."

4. **Involve your kids.** Our children are important, and so are their opinions. They should be involved in their education, especially as they grow older, and the holidays are a wonderful opportunity for unselfish giving. Ask them what they would like to do. You will be surprised at the creative, big ideas they come up with for their own education - ideas that may be better than yours!

Maybe they'd like to adopt a family at the holidays or help buy gifts for the shoe box for Operation Christmas with Samaritan's Purse.

([http://www.samaritanspurse.org/index.php/OCC/Pack\\_A\\_Shoe\\_Box/](http://www.samaritanspurse.org/index.php/OCC/Pack_A_Shoe_Box/)).

Our homeschools should be a place with a love and a thirst for learning, not drudgery that makes them feel like, "I just want to get this over with and go do something fun!" Your kids' input with their resulting enthusiasm and creative ideas will help you go outside the familiar routine and will open everyone's hearts more with Jesus' love. Your children will be sure to include fun things like making snow angels and making popcorn! ☺

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5. **Control the clutter.** I don't know about you, but I can't concentrate on homeschooling if there is chaos around me. A sinkful of dirty dishes, Mount Never-Rest of laundry, and floors that need to be swept distract me when I sit down at our dining table for our daughter's lessons. We always try to load the dishwasher at night, and do at least a couple of loads of laundry each day to maintain order.

Other chores like dusting or vacuuming are done on a weekly basis (if we're doing good!). The rooms that we use the most, such as the kitchen, the den, and the bathrooms, are maintained on a consistent basis. If family or friends are visiting from out of town, or there is additional menu planning, work parties, or holiday shopping, this adds extra stress to the routine.

One important part of homeschooling is training our children to help with chores. This is an area I struggle with, because sometimes it seems just easier to do it myself! But we're doing our kids a great disservice when we don't involve them in regular chores. It teaches them discipline and a good work ethic.



When I was growing up, our father had his own CPA business in our home. If he came upstairs during the daytime to see what we were doing and saw us watching t.v. or even worse, doing nothing, he would immediately put us to work - sweeping floors, doing laundry, raking the yard, mowing, washing the huge, front, wrap-around porch of our colonial home. He was raised on a farm and knew the value of hard work. I think his life's motto was, "Idle hands are the devil's playground." My father is in his 70's, and still has not retired as a CPA - although he is looking at possibly retiring soon!

At the time, my siblings and I hated his near obsession with making us work and his intolerance for laziness, but now I really appreciate that he taught me a hard work ethic.

Have your children help you with chores. Depending on their ages, they can cut up vegetables for dinner, do their own laundry, clean bathrooms, empty trashcans, and dust.

Let them help plan your holiday menu or shop for gifts for the younger siblings or relatives. Teach them how to bake the cookies, cakes, and puddings. Don't let your housework snowball out of control. A clean, organized home will bring a sense of peace and order to your homeschool.



6. **Take care of you.** If we don't take care of ourselves, then one day we might not be able to homeschool our children. It is not selfish to set time apart to nurture yourself and de-stress. The holidays often add stress to our lives, so be sure to have relaxing get-aways during this time, even if it's just for an hour with a friend for Starbucks' Pumpkin Spice Latte' or Sugar-Free Cinnamon Dolce. God wants you at peace and in the best of health.

Set time aside to take a nap or a hot bubble bath, to window shop, to read good books (Borders Book Store has *great* sales during the holidays!), to have quiet time with God, to take a walk or go to an exercise class.

Eat healthy, tasty foods, drink lots of water, get enough sleep, take times to relax, and exercise regularly. A couple of weeks ago I started a zumba aerobics class that our daughter Heather is teaching, and I hope to attend it consistently.

Jesus stressed the importance of valuing and taking care of ourselves in Mark 12: 28-31, CEV:

"One of the teachers of the Law of Moses came up while Jesus and the Sadducees were arguing. When he heard Jesus give a good answer, he asked him, "What is the most important commandment?"

Jesus answered, "The most important one says: `People of Israel, you have only one Lord and God. <sup>30</sup>You must love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.' The second most important commandment says: `**Love others as much as you love yourself.**' No other commandment is more important than these."

Your husband and your children need you to take care of yourself so that you can then take care of and nurture them. We can't pour out what we don't have to give. Take time each day to be refilled and refreshed to be your very best self for God and for others. Make the holidays special for not only your family, but for you!

Homeschooling our children is not easy, but it is worth it. Using these six tips will help you to prioritize your tasks each day and to make first things first, so that your holidays will flow smoothly and will create sweet memories. And remember, "You have a lifetime to work, but children are only young once." (Polish Proverb)

As we homeschool during the holidays, let's make Christ the centerpiece and enjoy what is most important about these days - God, our husbands, and our children!

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