# **How to encourage empathy in your child through the holiday season**

**Source: Sonya Philip, Educator & Founder, Learning Matters**

It’s natural for children to have expectations around the holiday season — What gifts will I get? What candy will my parents buy for me? Which friends or family members will I get to meet? Further, society, media, and mass advertising have led us to believe that you’re entitled to gifts, and children’s early rhymes too reiterate – all things nice if you’re on the “good” list as opposed to “bad.”

While nothing should come in the way of holiday cheer and children feeling thrilled about the festivities, this is also an ideal time to help children better understand the concept of empathy and kindness. After all, the holidays are a time of togetherness more than anything else.

So, how can we, as parents and educators, teach children to be empathetic and considerate towards others while still maintaining the holiday fervour? Here are some easy ways:

**1.    Encourage equal participation:**

We must help children understand that while they will be blessed with gifts and other niceties, they must equally participate. Encourage them to create special and heartfelt gifts for someone they like. This could be a friend, parent, sibling, teacher or someone they want to spread happiness to — school janitor, a homeless person, a child younger to them etc.

This helps the child understand the importance of responsibility and giving as opposed to only getting something. It also sends them the message that it is also a time to look out for others around us who might be in need of love, warmth, money etc. However, do remember not to push them into this. Simply ask them who’d they like to bestow a gift upon. Chances are children will already have someone in mind.

Equal participation also applies to tasks at home. Involve them in baking, decorations, gift-wrapping, cleaning etc. Ask them which task they would enjoy contributing to and allow them to take charge. This helps the child feel independent, responsible, and explore unique avenues of completing a task.

**2. Educate about diverse experiences:**

The holiday time looks different for different people, based on nationality, culture, religion etc. Educate your child on how people have unique ways of celebrating. This helps the child strengthen their understanding of diversity and others’ points of view.You could invite over a family that has traditions different from yours and enjoy the diversity.

“Empathy is about understanding what someone is going through and not judging them for it. Spending more time in your community around the holiday season can help foster more understanding for the people in and around your lives in both yourself and your kids.

**3. Emphasise the importance of time-agnostic empathy:**

While the holidays undoubtedly spark the spirit of joy, celebration and giving in us, they’re also a reminder that one should not limit these feelings to a particular time. Exhibiting a compassionate and empathetic attitude only during the holidays might send them the message that it’s a trade-off for gifts.

First, embody the behaviour you’d like your child to adopt. Ensure that you, as a parent or educator, are generally an empathetic person, who cares for others, listens to others’ feelings and is not quick to pass judgements on others.

When a child sees that you are a kind person, they will want to emulate that behaviour.

**Conclusion:**

The holiday season kindles a light in us that encourages us to be the best versions of ourselves, to value the importance of family, to practice gratitude, and to heartily give. We should definitely try to pass on these lessons to our children early on but with the caveat that feelings of empathy and kindness are timeless.

With these simple steps of encouraging equal participation, educating on diversity, and practising empathy each day, we can definitely help our children grow into wholesome, emotionally superior and empathetic individuals.