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Harvesting Gratitude: Teaching Social Skills and Mindful Eating Habits

By Lynea Gillen



Ever been to a children's party where the kids were thoughtfully sharing with each other, eating healthy food and having fun, too? This really can work! Heading into the holiday season, I have some thoughts and tips for moms, teachers, and caregivers for holiday parties for children at school and at home. Take what works for you and adapt to meet your situation and needs.

Having attended a party at the elementary school where I worked as a counselor was my impetus for change. At that party, each of the 32 students contributed some kind of food. There were large bottles of soda, big bags of chips and cookies. Some brought candy; others, beautifully decorated cupcakes. As soon as this bounty had been placed on a table that parents had decorated, the kids made a mad rush! As soon as they gobbled their first selections, they asked for more!

"What are we teaching with parties like this?" I wondered. I knew some schools had stopped allowing sweets, opting for non-edible items like pencils and stickers. "That's a good change," I thought, "but is it just gifts that make something a party? What kind of party could I create that would be more meaningful?"

For inspiration, I turned to the mindfulness and yoga practices I've studied most of my life.

Thinking of wholesome food, I began with a trip to a local farm, where I was able to taste, touch and smell many varieties of regional fruit. I bought Seckel pears, perfectly ripe, and sweet Honey Crisp apples, as well as a gallon of freshly pressed apple cider. I bought gluten-free pumpkin cookies from a local bakery and Free Trade chocolate that helps fund programs to protect endangered species. Then I gathered some beautiful fall objects in a basket and selected a soothing CD to create a mood.

And with that, I was off to the 7th and 8th graders waiting in one of my classrooms.

We began our party with some calming, yoga-based breathing. Then I turned on the music and dimmed the lights. "Sit in a circle," I said. "We're having a different kind of party this year." I placed a beautiful shawl in the center of a large table and asked a few students to turn on the LED candles and create a centerpiece with the flowers I had brought.

After they had all cleaned their hands with wipes I'd provided, I passed around some deep red napkins. "Open them," I said, "and admire their color." We did this with some seasonal decorated napkins, too, admiring the artwork.



A new style Summer party.

The basket came next. “Use these objects to decorate your setting,” I said, giving them each a small piece of colorful paper, as well, with their name calligraphied on it. Then I carefully passed around some nice glasses and a decanter. “Smell the cider before pouring it,” I guided. “Don’t taste anything until all have been served.” I passed the foods around one by one, sharing a story for each. I told them about the farm I had visited—how beautiful it was, how I had thought of them while buying the fruit. I read the label on the chocolate and talked about how we were helping protect animals. I told them about the wonderful little bakery that had made the cookies.

Once everyone had a small amount of food, I passed around a stone for each to hold while telling us one of his or her favorite things about the holidays. They spoke quietly. They listened to one another. They ate slowly. They enjoyed their food.

One student said that she felt like she was in a different country.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s cool.”

Another said, “This is a quiet party.”

“What do you think about that?” I asked.

“It’s much better. I hate all of that noise.”

The party lasted 45 minutes. We talked about healthy food and parties and gratitude. We shared stories about holidays and told of the parties we’d enjoy with friends and family this year. Afterward, one of the boys said. “Let’s have parties like this every time.”

What can you do differently during the holidays this year? What healthy foods and gratitude can you weave into what you now do around the table or in the classroom? Try something new this holiday season...and carry it through into the New Year with ongoing holidays and celebrations. I’d love to hear what you do, and we will continue to share ideas with others on our Good People Everywhere Facebook page at [facebook.com/GoodpeopleEverywhere](https://www.facebook.com/GoodpeopleEverywhere).

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Lynea Gillen, MS, award-winning author, counselor and teacher, has been sharing her love of literature with children for over 30 years. Her most recent book, *Good People Everywhere*, is a triple award winner: Mom’s Choice, Teacher’s Choice and Moonbeam Children’s Book Award. She is also the creator of the highly-regarded Mindful Moments Cards and two other Mom’s Choice Award winners: the book *Yoga Calm for Children* and the DVD *Kids Teach Yoga: Flying Eagle*. Gillen lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband Jim, where she enjoys hiking, gardening and spending time with all the good people in her life. Read more about Lynea Gillen at www.threepebblepress.com.