

15 Loving Valentine's Day Traditions

Valentine's Day is a wonderful holiday because it celebrates the purpose of life. No, not chocolate, LOVE!

We all need to be cherished. But despite our good intentions, too often we forget to tell the people we love just how precious they are to us. Valentine's Day can be a wonderful opportunity to remind all of our loved ones (not only our sweethearts) how glad we are that they're in our lives.

1. Rethink Gifts.

Valentine's gifts should be about the heart to heart expressions that build intimacy and connection. That means handmade cards, extra loving time together, or massages, not purchased gifts.

If you must buy a gift, choose it using the GIFT test: does it create more Gratitude, Intimacy, Fondness and Trust between you, or does it just impress? In other words, a bottle of inexpensive champagne, some sandwiches, and an invitation to a massage and picnic supper in bed after the kids are asleep meets this test a lot better than jewelry or candy. For kids or adults, try one of the gift ideas below.

2. Alternate gift ideas:

- **A Letter of Appreciation.**

The best gift of all is always a simple letter to your loved ones detailing how grateful you are to have them in your life. Be as specific as possible; "the way you let me sleep in the morning while you make the kids breakfast" and "the way you sing off key" are even more satisfying than "You're lovable," because the recipient feels seen and appreciated.

- **Homemade Valentines.**

Kids feel loved when we spend time making something for them, rather than buying it. Why not make Valentines? This can be as simple as 15 minutes with red construction paper, scissors, and magic markers, or as elaborate as a joyful, creative family project for three hours.

- **A gift certificate for a backrub or foot massage every night for a month.**

Kids feel loved when we listen to them and give them an opportunity to talk through their daily challenges. Every single day, spend 15 minutes snuggling with each child before bed. Not reading, that's separate. Snuggle time is just chatting, or snuggling companionably. Most kids love a backrub and hand or foot rub.

3. Get up a few minutes early so you can enjoy opening each others' Valentines at breakfast

Be sure to include something heart-shaped or sweet to eat.

4. Let your kids know your love is with them all day

...by tucking little construction paper hearts with love notes into their backpack, lunch, jacket pocket, etc for them to find throughout the day.

5. Make the dinner mood festive

Make the dinner mood festive with a short family dance party before dinner. Don't forget the romantic slow dance for the grown-ups! After the dancing, eat with candles on the table.

6. At dinner, go around the table and give each person a chance to give an appreciation

...to every other family member. They don't have to be earth-shaking to strengthen relationships.

"I appreciate Eli for helping me with my homework....I appreciate Mom for spending special time with me at bedtime....I appreciate Dad for always being cheerful....I appreciate myself for getting out of the house on time in the morning."

7. Find five minutes to spend by yourself giving thanks for those you love.

One at a time, visualize yourself hugging them, and them beaming back at you. Let the infinite tenderness of your love for them wash over you. Ask for help to let go of anything that gets in the way of being close to this person, who is so precious to you.

8. Spread the love.

Before Valentines Day, invite your kids' friends to make Valentines. Good music (theirs), delicious snacks (your job) and a digital or instant camera ("Here's a picture of me making your valentine") seem to provide enough cool context for tweens and even younger teens to let themselves enjoy this project. In fact, inviting friends always seems to double the fun, whatever their age.

9. Keep Valentines from past years and decorate the house

...with them for the week before and the week after. Each year you'll ooh and ah over beautiful ones from the past, and the messy, misspelled hearts from the little ones will become priceless evidence of their past adorableness, which even they will treasure as they get older. For the month of February, your house will be papered with love.

10. Your kids can make very simple Valentines for their class

...which do so much more to fill kids' cups than the store-bought "fast-food" ones. Just cut out hearts, or run them out of the computer. Your child can color and decorate and elaborate as much or little as he wants. Or take your child's drawing and have it color-xeroxed with red ink, then just write in the names.

11. Make some extra Valentines

...to pass out as you go through your day. You'll be amazed whose day you'll be moved to brighten: the subway token clerk, the grocer, coworkers, neighbors, a homeless person you pass on the street. And you'll go home with your own heart glowing and a few sizes larger. You might even just want to leave anonymous valentines at each neighbor's door.

12. Need candy to make the day complete?

In our house, sweets were never a major part of Valentine's day, but my kids certainly came home from school with treats, and we often make cookies if we can find the time. Be aware that teachers say the red dye is worse than the sugar in setting kids off, and scientists think it is pretty bad for you. Chocolate, on the other hand, is the perfect food, according to the strictly unscientific research I've conducted.

13. How about a telephone Valentine chain?

Call someone dear to your family and pass the phone around to take turns telling this person you love them. Then ask that person to "Pass it forward" by calling someone they love, asking that person to call another, etc.

14. Sound surround yourself with love.

This is the day for your Love Song playlist. Skip the heartbroken ones and go straight for celebration, all day long!

15. Love in Practice.

If you'd like your kids to take pride in making the world a better place, Valentines Day is a great opportunity to express love for others by taking valentines goodies or homemade valentines to a nursing home, hospital, or soup kitchen.

As four wise teachers once said, "*In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.*"