



What We Learned from the December Dilemma Survey  
By Edmund Case

In November 2004, InterfaithFamily.com announced the results of its December Dilemma Survey. The survey, which fielded responses from 199 people nationwide in October 2004, was designed to understand how people in interfaith families celebrate their own and their partners' holidays and to gain insight into those celebrations.

The survey respondents were self-selected, and 80 percent of the respondents who said they had children raised them as Jews, in comparison to the 33 percent reported in the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001 (see Appendix for demographic information). While the survey thus is not representative of all interfaith families, it provides important new information about interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews -- a very important demographic for Jewish continuity.

The survey found that Hanukkah is an important holiday for the respondents: 93 percent participated in Hanukkah celebrations last year, while 87 percent of respondents participated in Christmas celebrations.

Fifty-three percent of the respondents decorated a Christmas tree in their own home; 64% percent appear to have Christmas dinner in the homes of relatives or friends:

<b>2. Which of the following did you do in your own home (check all that apply):</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 185)</b>	<b>3. Which of the following did you do in the homes of relatives and/or friends (check all that apply):</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 185)</b>
Light a menorah	183	99	Light a menorah	110	59
Give gifts	167	90	Give gifts	96	51
Hanukkah decorations	118	64	Hanukkah decorations	41	22
Hanukkah music and songs	94	51	Hanukkah music and songs	46	25
Hanukkah foods	145	78	Hanukkah foods	88	47
Tell the Hanukkah story	102	55	Tell the Hanukkah story	39	21
Other (specify)	21	11	Other (specify)	10	5

<b>8. Which of the following did you do in your own home (check all that apply):</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 173)</b>	<b>9. Which of the following did you do in the homes of relatives and/or friends (check all that apply):</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 173)</b>
Decorate a Christmas tree	92	53	Decorate a Christmas tree	41	27
Hang stockings	60	37	Hang stockings	39	23
Give gifts	116	67	Give gifts	133	77
Christmas decorations	69	40	Christmas decorations	63	36
Christmas music and songs	71	41	Christmas music and songs	68	39
Christmas foods	57	33	Christmas foods	110	64
Tell the Christmas story	18	10	Tell the Christmas story	9	5
Other (specify)	12	7	Other (specify)	9	5

In addition, 25% of respondents attended Christmas religious services.

The common perception about interfaith families is that the December holidays can be challenging and unpleasant as family members struggle with identity crises, conflicting emotions and family guilt. However, a majority of the survey respondents actually eagerly looks forward to and enjoys the December holidays:

<b>15. Please rank how you look forward to the December holidays, where 5 = eager anticipation, 3 = ambivalence, and 1 = not looking forward to the holidays.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 197)</b>
1	15	8
2	17	9
3	54	27
4	70	36
5	41	21

One respondent said, “I really enjoy the holidays, because it allows us as a family to share our celebration with others of all faiths and races. I am glad my husband is Jewish because it’s allowed me to learn so much of his background.”

Contrary to popular impressions, Hanukkah is perceived as more fun than Christmas -- 82 percent said they enjoyed Hanukkah very much, while only 53 percent said they enjoyed Christmas very much:

<b>5. If you participated in Hanukkah celebrations last year, please rate how much you enjoyed your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 189)</b>	<b>12. If you participated in Christmas celebrations last year, please rate how much you enjoyed your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 170)</b>
1	0	0	1	10	6
2	7	4	2	25	15
3	28	15	3	44	26
4	66	35	4	42	25
5	88	47	5	49	29

Perhaps more surprisingly, respondents reported that more children enjoyed Hanukkah very much than did Christmas (78 percent to 69 percent, respectively):

<b>6. If your children participated in Hanukkah celebrations last year, please rate how much they enjoyed your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 123)</b>	<b>13. If your children participated in Christmas celebrations last year, please rate how much they enjoyed your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 108)</b>
1	0	0	1	3	3
2	2	2	2	6	6
3	24	20	3	25	23
4	30	24	4	31	29
5	67	54	5	43	40

For interfaith families raising Jewish children, a primary way to resolve potential conflicts over the December holidays is to treat Hanukkah, but not Christmas, as a religious holiday. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that their Hanukkah celebrations were more religious than secular. In contrast, 75 percent said their Christmas celebrations were more secular than religious:

4. If you participated in Hanukkah celebrations last year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious, and 1 = entirely secular.	Count	% (of 191)	11. If you participated in Christmas celebrations last year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious, and 1 = entirely secular.	Count	% (of 167)
1	16	8	1	98	59
2	51	27	2	28	17
3	81	42	3	19	11
4	40	21	4	16	10
5	3	2	5	6	4

Many respondents commented on their non-religious celebrations of Christmas:

We celebrate both holidays, Christmas as a secular holiday with Santa, lacking the religious aspect. We celebrate Hanukkah as the religious holiday.

Christmas is not the religious celebration people make it out to be. It has become, for our family, a chance to get together and celebrate.

It's a Christian party which we celebrate in a secular way. What we celebrate ... is the reunion of the family and how we can learn to value each other's traditions, even if they are not our own.

I view the celebration of Christmas in a secular manner and enjoy the spirit of giving and the joy that the holiday brings.

We think Christmas is a great celebration of peace and goodwill. We don't happen to believe in the divinity of Christ, but we celebrate the spirit of peace that should surround Christmas.

Participating in some Christmas celebrations in a way to connect with my family. I miss Christmas in the sense that I miss my mom.

[Our children] identify themselves as Jewish with a Catholic father. I think that they will always want to celebrate Christmas for the festive nature of the holiday and not the religious part, which they know but do not identify with.

[Our children] have a good understanding that we celebrate Jewish holidays because we are a Jewish family with a Catholic mother who keeps her traditions and shares them with her husband and children.

“Telling the holiday story” clearly has religious implications to these respondents; while 55 percent told the Hanukkah story, only 10 percent told the Christmas story. As one respondent said, “There is a clear distinction between ‘this is a holiday I celebrate because I believe in the story’ and ‘this is a holiday that I celebrate with Dad’.” One respondent didn’t tell the Christmas story until the children were teens:

We have been clear to our daughters since they were little that mommy and daddy and their families celebrate different holidays and beliefs. We always treated each holiday equally in terms of respect, but explained the actual meanings of the holidays so they knew they were not just about gifts. We explain that Christmas is significant for celebrating Jesus' birth and even if they don't see Jesus as God, He is a significant cultural figure that they should be aware of and respectful of. When they were little we did not read the Christmas story to them, nor did we have a nativity scene as part of our decorations. Now that they are teen-agers, we do.

Some in the Jewish community are concerned with religious “syncretism,” or blending of religious traditions. An important survey finding is that despite the holidays’ close proximity in 2003 (with the eight-day holiday of Hanukkah starting December 20, 2003), more than two-thirds of the respondents said they kept their celebrations separate, as opposed to blending them:

<b>16. If you participated in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations last year, would you say that you blended your holiday celebrations, or kept them separate, where 5 = kept separate, and 1 = blended.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 169)</b>
1	18	11
2	13	8
3	22	13
4	32	19
5	84	50

Although 81 percent of interfaith families stated they participated in celebrations of both holidays, some of the Jews in interfaith families reported residual discomfort. While 53 percent had Christmas trees in their homes, 26 percent of them felt more uncomfortable than comfortable with the tree:

<b>14. If you are Jewish and you had a Christmas tree in your home, please rank how you felt about the tree, where 5 = very comfortable, and 1 = very uncomfortable.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 78)</b>
1	7	9
2	13	17
3	26	33
4	18	23
5	14	18

Twenty-nine percent of Jewish relatives were more uncomfortable participating in Christmas celebrations (29%), compared to no non-Jewish relatives more uncomfortable with participating in Hanukkah celebrations, while 32% of Jewish relatives were more comfortable, compared to 85% of non-Jewish relatives:

<b>21. If you are Jewish relative of an interfaith couple and you participated in their Christmas celebrations last year, please rank how you felt about your participation, where 5 = very comfortable, and 1 = very uncomfortable.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 41)</b>	<b>20. If you are a non-Jewish relative of an interfaith couple and you participated in their Hanukkah celebrations last year, please rank how you felt about your participation, where 5 = very comfortable, and 1 = very uncomfortable.</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 20)</b>
1	7	17	1	0	0
2	5	12	2	0	0
3	16	39	3	3	15
4	5	12	4	3	15
5	8	20	5	14	70

Despite such lingering discomfort, the survey respondents readily explained that they participate in both holiday celebrations as a way of sharing in, honoring and respecting the traditions of the both sides of their family.

One respondent said, “We teach our children to acknowledge and appreciate other traditions while learning to be responsible, educated and committed Jews.” Another said, “I hope to tell [our young children] that this is something very important to their mother's family, and that despite the fact that we are Jewish, it is important to respect other people's faith; faith in a moral and compassionate religion is admirable.” Another said, “My children's grandparents are Christian and these are the only grandchildren they have with whom to celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Hanukkah at our house, and we celebrate Christmas at their grandparents’ house. We are sharing their holiday with them, just as they share our holidays with us.”

Only 14% of the respondents who said they were raising their children as Jews told their non-Jewish relatives not to give Christmas presents to their children.

A major concern in the Jewish community over intermarriage is whether the children of interfaith parents develop Jewish identities. Interestingly, many of the survey respondents wrote that celebrating Christmas actually strengthened their own and their children's Jewish identity rather than weakened it.

One respondent said: "I think that Christmas celebrations do not alter [children's] Jewish identity as long as parents and family explain what is happening." Many parents explain to their children that attending a Christmas celebration is similar to attending someone else's birthday party: "It's Mom's holiday, and it's similar to having a good time at someone else's birthday party.... doesn't mean it's your birthday!" "We help my mom celebrate HER holiday, Christmas, just like we help her celebrate HER birthday-its not my children's day, but HERS." "Christmas is Nana and Pops' holiday; Hanukkah is ours."

One respondent explained that participating in Christmas celebrations was a positive factor for children's Jewish identity because it would lead them to make informed choices: "I want them to actively choose being Jews and value the Jewish beliefs but also to be knowledgeable and respectful of the traditions that half their family has." Another said, "I don't feel that sharing in the celebrations of others negatively affects one's own religious identity. I think it strengthens the awareness that there are many different cultures and religions and teaches acceptance and even curiosity about the unfamiliar."

Other verbatim comments: "Celebrating Christmas as a secular holiday has not caused our children to have any identity problems because we celebrate Hanukkah as a religious holiday and we read stories, light candles and give only religious gifts for Hanukkah while Christmas is only non-religious." "We have tried to teach him respect for others' holidays and traditions, while maintaining our own Jewish traditions, not as superior to anyone else's, but rather our own, and therefore special to us." "A few Christmas gifts do not undermine their firmly established Jewish identity and we are very comfortable in celebrating and honoring my husband at Christmas for his year-round support of raising our children in the Jewish faith." "Our children's Jewish identity will be strong enough to support them and they'll know that it's important to support others in their religious convictions."

One respondent made the important point that Jewish religious identity is formed throughout the year, not just in December, in response to a question asking whether children's religious identity was confused by participating in Christmas celebrations: "Absolutely not! Christmas is once a year... Shabbat is every week. They get the constant reinforcement of their faith."

Finally, several of the respondents' comments illustrate how a sense of humor can help everyone concerned with Jewish continuity in interfaith families:

One thing I have learned, from non-Jewish stepparents as well as my spouse; you cannot separate a Christian from their Christmas tree. You might as well cut off their right arm.

I think celebrating Christmas made me more tolerant. As a teenager I wondered if it was wrong for a Jew to so enjoy singing Christmas carols and as a child when I went to church services with school as I walked up the nave I would have a quick chat with G\_d, to remind Him I was praying to Him not Jesus.

Usually during November and December when we are out shopping, there's always more than one other shopper who feels compelled to advise my daughter "Santa will bring it for you," or "what's Santa bringing you?" and when she answers, "He's not bringing me anything --we speak Hanukkah," they've always been startled.

### Appendix: Demographic information

Eighty percent of the respondents said they were raising their children as Jews:

Analysis of answers about religion in which children are/were being raised	Count	% (of 152 who answered questions about children)
Jewish	121	80
Both	12	8
Some in one, some in other	12	8
One religion other than Jewish	5	3
None	2	1

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents identified as Jewish, 11% as Catholic, and 9% as Protestant:

23. What is your religion (check all that apply):	Count	% (of 213 answers)
Jewish	142	67
Catholic	24	11
Protestant	19	9
Muslim	1	0
Hindu	0	0
Agnostic	4	2
Atheist	6	3
None	2	1
Other (specify)	15	7

Eighty-one percent of respondents were female:

26. What is your gender:	Count	% (of 194)
Male	36	19
Female	158	81

Sixty-three percent of respondents were between 30 and 49:

<b>27. What is your age:</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 196)</b>
Under 20	0	0
20-29	35	18
30-39	62	32
40-49	61	31
50-59	27	14
60-69	11	6
70 and over	0	0

Age of children:

<b>28. What is the age of your children (check all that apply):</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 158)</b>
10 and under	80	51
11-19	44	28
20-29	23	21
30 and over	11	7

Seventy-one percent of respondents belong to a Jewish organization:

<b>29. Do you belong to any Jewish organizations (synagogue, Jewish Community Center, etc.)?</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% (of 197)</b>
Yes	140	71
No	57	29