

For children across the world, December is going to be an exciting month writes Sarah Husselmann. Christmas, Eid-ul-Adha and Hanukkah are three religious festivals celebrated at this time, when children receive gifts, eat delicious food and have fun with family and friends.



# Children Dig December!

## Christmas

Christmas starts on Christmas Day and concludes with the Feast of the Epiphany on 6th January (commonly known as The Twelve Days of Christmas).

### A very European Christmas...

British children hang stockings on the fireplace and put pillow cases or sacks at the end of their beds on Christmas Eve, in the hope that Father Christmas will fill them with presents. In France, shoes are placed in front of the fire place. In Germany and Holland children receive gifts on St Nicholas Day. St Nicholas is called "Sinter Klaas" in Dutch (this is where the name Santa Claus comes from).

In Holland, on St Nicholas Eve, children leave clogs and shoes out to be filled with presents. They also leave hay and carrots for St Nicholas' horse. In Germany, children leave their shoes or boots outside the front door.

In Italy, children wait until Epiphany to receive gifts delivered by a kind witch called La Befana who slides down chimneys to fill stockings left out by the children.

Families in Spain have a large dinner together on Christmas Eve (Nochebuena) which can last until 6 o'clock in the morning!

In Poland, families enjoy a meal together on Christmas Eve starting with everyone taking a piece of an Oplatek wafer biscuit. Straw may be put on the floor or under the table cloth as a reminder that Jesus was born in a stable.

## Eid-ul-Adha

Eid-ul-Adha is a three day holiday marking the end of the Hajj, (the annual pilgrimage to Makkah) that starts on the 10th day of the last month of the Islamic calendar; in 2008, Eid-ul-Adha is likely to start on 8th December.

## The Festival of Sacrifice...

The story of Eid-ul-Adha relates to Ibrahim's dream that Allah asked him to sacrifice his son. Ibrahim was about to obey when Allah gave him a sheep as a sacrifice instead. Today, Muslims commonly sacrifice a sheep (or other grazing animal) and share the meat with family, friends and poorer members of the community.

On Eid-ul-Adha, families rise early and attend the Mosque. Whilst spending time with family, children may be encouraged to read from the Qur'an and storybooks about the Prophet Ibrahim. Family members share stories about past pilgrimages to Makkah or discuss plans to make the journey.

During the celebrations girls and women often paint patterns on their hands with henna dye and children receive gifts or money. It is also typical to give money to charity to help the poor buy clothes and food so that they too can celebrate.

Traditional food varies across Muslim countries, but sweet food is often served in order to show hope that life will be just as sweet. Halwa (crushed sesame seeds with honey) is popular.



## Hanukkah

Hanukkah (also spelt Chanukah and at least 14 other correct ways!) is a Jewish festival and an eight day holiday starting on the 25th night of the Jewish month of Kislev (22nd December in 2008).

Hanukkah is not one of the most important Jewish festivals but lots of fun for children.

## The Festival of Lights...

Hanukkah (Hebrew word meaning 'dedication') originates from events 2000 years ago when Judea was ruled by a Syrian-Greek Emperor called Antiochus. Antiochus tried to assimilate the Jewish Maccabees into Greek culture, demanding that they worship Greek gods. A small group of people

rebelled, saving their temple and lit a small oil lamp that miraculously stayed alight for eight days.

Today, Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting candles on a Menorah each night during the eight day holiday.

After lighting the candles together, families eat and play games and some families give small presents on each of the eight nights.

Traditional foods eaten during Hanukkah are latke (potato fritters), pancakes and doughnuts - all fried foods in memory of the miraculous oil in the temple.

A fun game for the whole family is Dreidel, a gambling game using a four-sided spinning top (a Dreidel). Instead of playing with money, players use nuts, raisins, or chocolate which they place in a kitty.



## Did you know?

Why Boxing Day? One theory is that 26th December was the day Christmas boxes, collected at the back of churches, were shared with the poor.

In the Czech Republic if children are not good they are said to receive a bundle of sticks. In France, Le Père Fouettard (Father Spanker!) has the important job of deciding whether children should receive gifts or a spanking.

If you received all of the gifts in the song 'The Twelve Days of Christmas', you would receive 364 presents.

In Greek, X means Christ which is where the word 'Xmas' comes from, contrary to the idea that people wanted to take the 'Christ' out of Christmas.

In France In 1962, a law was passed decreeing that all letters written to Santa would receive a letter, each student gets a response!