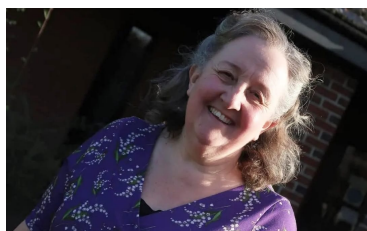


# STEPPING OFF THE CRAFT CONVEYOR BELT: RETHINKING CHRISTMAS IN THE EARLY YEARS



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AND MENTORS SCHEME AND  
REACHOUT SPH CHILDMINDER  
PARTNER.

First, let's get things straight, I love Christmas and everything about it, the preparation, putting up the decorations, wrapping gifts, visiting Christmas markets. I love it, but I think we can all agree that it can also be a stressful time, so much to do and so little time to do it. If we feel like that then maybe the children in our settings do too.

Over the last year or so I and the Stronger Practice Hub team have really tried to promote a more child led approach to the early years experience. The "Revised EYFS", "Development Matters" and websites such as "Help for Early Years Providers" or the "Early Years Evidence Store" are all urging us to step back, slow down and let children lead their own exploration and creativity. In general, I think this is working but, in the lead up to Christmas even the most laid-back childminder can get drawn back into the conveyor belt of Christmas crafts. You know the ones I mean, the handprint reindeer, the paper plate Santa and the doily angel. In this blog I'm going to think about why this is and consider how we can have the confidence to step away from the craft conveyor belt.



Evidence tells us that young children learn most effectively when their play and exploration is self led, with scaffolding from adults where needed. Children who have agency over their creativity are developing self-regulation and critical thinking skills. Role playing giving presents or cards supports the development of empathy and emotional maturity.



## WE ARE ALL EXPERIENCED PRACTITIONERS SO WHY DO WE STRUGGLE TO RECOGNISE THIS AT CHRISTMAS TIME?

I'm going to guess that the main reason is "the parents" whether perceived or real, we may feel that parents expect ornaments, gifts and cards from their child at Christmas. But do they really? Have we asked them? This is our opportunity to educate them about the benefits of child led learning. Each year I send out a message to all of my families, explaining my pedagogy and the reasons behind how I work with their children. Without sounding harsh our role is to support children's development, not to make decorations. Try explaining to parents that an activity which produces a row of identical ornaments hasn't been made by their child but by you and do they really want that on their tree?

You could include parents in different ways, ask them to send in greenery from their gardens, or invite them in for a loose parts exploration with a few festive touches or a story session with a hot chocolate and cookie.

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If you feel that you must make something for children to take home, how about a photo book of their child's year with you or a picture of the child engaged in a festive activity in a photo bauble. Or send some festive play materials home, some loose parts, scented playdough and cinnamon sticks for example and give them the gift of time with their child.



## SO, WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO THE CRAFT CONVEYOR BELT?

Let's take a leaf from the Steiner/Waldorf approach and gently recognise the season rather than focusing everything on the big day. Try adding small invitations which introduce the idea of Christmas without being overwhelming. Add a few Christmas cards to your mark making provision, wrapping paper and tape to your role play area. Personally, I provide a craft basket with a selection of bits and bobs that the children can choose to use or not use in any way they like. Let's not forget books, there are so many wonderful evocative books which celebrate this time of year.

As childminders we often have children in our care from babies until they go to secondary school, that means that a huge part of their childhood is spent with us and we can help create that wonderful sense of the Christmas season by including them in our settings traditions, whether that's baking gingerbread together, going for a winter walk, toasting marshmallows on a camp fire, decorating the tree or getting cosy on the sofa reading stories.

All of these things have a deep impact on a child's sense of place and security. They will be able to look back and remember those special times together. I could be wrong but I don't think many children will look back on the adult led Christmas crafts of the past with a sense of nostalgia, but they might look back at their own strange and wonderful creation that they had ownership of and was truly meaningful to them at that moment.

Lastly, I urge you all to give yourselves a break too, the lead up to Christmas can be incredible stressful but we can choose to change that. I hope you feel able to step back and enjoy the season with the children in your care.

**HOW LUCKY ARE WE THAT WE GET TO BE WITH THEM AS THEY  
 DISCOVER THIS MAGICAL TIME?**

**MERRY CHRISTMAS.**

