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*Happy
Holidays*
for the kid in all of us

How to Handle The Holiday 'Gimmies'



Giving without inciting greed is a challenge. For months, store windows glitter, trees twinkle, and Santa beckons. The air is filled with more promise than snowfall. In our hearts, we long to shower our children with everything they want.

But from experience we know that as soon as the gifts are opened, the house is reduced to shambles, and we have created gluttons for whom toys are like a sugar fix: a momentary high, followed by a renewed hunger sated only by more, more, more.

That concern doesn't mean you should go to the other extreme—making a lesson out of the holidays, says Ava L. Siegler, director of New York's Institute for Child, Adolescent, and Family Studies and author of *What Should I Tell the Kids? A Parent's Guide to Real Problems in the Real World* (Plume Paperback, 1995, \$10.95). "You have to strike a balance. You cannot say to a child, 'This year you're not getting any gifts because we're giving to the rain forest.' Young children see generosity as a form of love. We all do."

Here's how you can temper your child's materialism without becoming the Grinch:

Give to the needy. Actions speak louder than words. So, as a family, go caroling at a retirement home, make sandwiches for the homeless, or take toys, clothes, or canned goods to a charity. It's important to involve children every step of the way so they understand the process and it becomes second nature, says psychoanalyst Irene Wineman-Marcus of Great Neck, N.Y.

Houston mother Karen Harberg takes time to explain to her kids why food and gifts are donated at their annual holiday party. Then she takes them along for the delivery. "They have a grasp of where the food and gifts go."

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If possible, let your child choose the cause. When Justin Spizman was 4, he asked his mom Robyn if they could give gifts to Atlanta's needy on the final night of Hanukkah. "Children want to help other children," says Spizman, author of *When Words Matter Most* (Crown Publishers, 1996, \$14).

Give thanks. Your children should be expected to say thank you, says Stanley Turecki, M.D., New York child psychiatrist and author of *Normal Children Have Problems, Too* (Bantam Books, 1995, \$12.95). "Young children might not

understand concepts like, 'You'll hurt Grandma's feelings if you don't,' but they should be polite. Just tell them it's good manners and your family practices good manners."

Reene Mitchell, a Detroit-area mother, started saying thank you to her daughter as soon as the child began reaching for objects. "By the time she understood the words, they were a natural reaction because she'd heard them for a long time."

Thank-you notes can become a family project. A child who can't write his own letter can use fill-in-the-blank stationery or can draw the gift and sign with an X or a fingerprint. As you create the letter together, says Alison Brisco, a Houston mother, "It's important for kids to understand Granny and Grandpa spent a lot of time thinking what they might like, so they have to take the time to say thank you."

Set limits early. Nathaniel Higgins, 11, of Houston, never expects more than one fun toy and one educational gift each Christmas. "It's now second nature with Nathaniel," says his mother, Pauline. "In fact, this year he's offered to take out the trash, clean his room, water the plants, and forsake his educational present so he can

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get a bike. I laughed and said, 'Nice try.'

Amy and Jim Dacyczyn of Leeds, Maine, set their limit at \$30 for a main gift for each of their six kids, ages 5 to 13. Los Angeles mom Robin Piccone and her husband, Richard Battaglia, stick to a goal of one expensive toy and other less costly ones for their 4- and 7-year-old sons. "I feel like Scrooge, but I know my older son can play with a string for an hour and a half," Piccone says. "If you buy them a toy, they're over it in five minutes."

Early limits pay off later, says psychologist Stephen W. Garber, Ph.D., and author of *Beyond Ritual* (Villard, 1996, \$23). "Lots of times we are too permissive when they're younger, and all of a sudden they become adolescents, and it's too late to crack down," Garber, like many child therapists, sees nothing wrong with kids making gift lists, "as long as you let them know that they



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won't get everything."

You may want to ask your kids to label their first, second, and third preferences, as the Battaglias do. Or, you can rule out certain gifts as too costly or inappropriate.

"The key to saying no is explaining why—and not just at the last minute, when the child is wearing you down,"

Turecki says. "If you do change your perspective on gift-giving, it's always good to explain in language they can understand. Tell them that you've been giving too many gifts, and you still will give gifts, but not as many. You don't just stop and expect the child to figure it out."

Simple explanations will also help counter the complaint, "How come Tommy next door got all the Power Rangers and I only got one?" Turecki adds. "Just say, 'Tommy lives in a different family. We believe in different things than Tommy's family.' You don't have to go further than that. You don't have to say that Tommy is spoiled or talk about financial issues. The explanation should be brief, concise, and consistent."

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Focus on the meaning of the season. Long before the holidays, you can start reading about their significance—holding off on Santa Claus stories till the end. Renee Mitchell started reading to her children about Kwanza, the celebration of African-American culture, when they were babies. "I don't think it's a waste of time to explain the meaning of Kwanza. Eventually they'll get it. In the meantime, they understand it's important based on my tone of voice."

If parents stress values and the meaning of religion year-round, "then the holiday issues will be much less netlesome," says Rabbi Richard Block of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California.

Plan activity nights. The eight nights of Hanukkah, the seven nights of Kwanza, and the weeks of Advent can be a time to do rather than amass.

The Spizmans have Hanukkah theme nights for books, recipes, good deeds, baking, long-distance calls, and learning new hobbies. You also might have a gift-of-self night (such as a promise not to nag during spring break) or a word night, in which each finds a word to stump the others. "There are so many ways to be creative without putting the emphasis on 'buy me, buy me,'" Spizman says. "Every Hanukkah, our kids learn something new—maybe magic tricks or a sport. It's a way for them to interact, and

it builds confidence."

In with the new, out with the old. Make it a rule: If your child gets a new toy, he must give an old (unbroken) one to someone less fortunate. After a few tears, children get used to the idea, Piccone says.

Show by example. If you're not greedy at holidays or throughout the year, your children won't be either, Siegler says. "Kids take their cues from their parents. They do what you do, not what you say. If you're in a frenzy, and the holidays are more hassle than happy, the experience is diminished for your child."

Parents with different viewpoints should seek a compromise both can respect—and remind themselves their "when I was a kid" standard no longer applies, Garber says. "Our memory is that we got everything. That may have been true, but there weren't the video games, the Nintendos, and other more expensive things." If you feel you've overspent, you also might hide the excess for future birthdays.

In the end, costly baubles aren't what count. The atmosphere of the holidays will linger long after the gifts are gone. "The goal is to create a balance," Spizman says. "The more you get, the more you want. But if you get the rewards from giving, you start to realize it's the greatest gift of all. Those rewards are appreciated for a lifetime." ■