

Christmas With Children

Children have four unspoken needs for a good family Christmas:

1. **Relaxed and loving time with the family:** To achieve this, you will need to look at your schedule and decide how you can spend more time with your family.

- C Taking extra time off from work
- C Simplifying holiday preparations
- C Entertaining and being entertained less
- C Buying and making fewer gifts
- C Watching less television
- C Traveling less



2. **An evenly paced holiday season:** As one child said in *Unplug the Christmas Machine* (Quill, NY, 1982), "I have to wait two billion years for Christmas. When it comes, it only lasts a second." As a family, plan your Christmas season and don't let outside forces take away from your plan. Start with the first Sunday of Advent, not before! Have devotions and some special event. Remember that Advent is a time of reflection and preparation, so be sure to plan these kinds of time into your family schedule, even if it means (as it surely will!) giving up something else. Talk about the whole season (through Epiphany, January 6). Talk as a family about what you want to do to prepare for Jesus' coming. When decisions have been made, set the times and dates on a calendar and commit to them.

Include children in Advent activities . . . lighting candles . . . fetching matches . . . reading . . . Have an Advent calendar . . . Have a creche that small children can handle. Add the characters gradually as the story unfolds during all of the Christmas season. For instance, Wise Men shouldn't arrive until Epiphany. Use it actively to tell the story regularly. Let the children tell it to you.

Planning what will happen after Christmas day helps avoid the popular myth that Christmas is over once the packages have been opened. Plan some special events - fun, educational, or service - after Christmas. Game night? Puzzles? Outing? Christmas does not end Christmas Day, but with Epiphany, January 6. Plan a celebration on Epiphany.

3. **Strong family traditions:** Special food? Special rituals? Every family has them. Discuss yours as a family to decide which are helpful and meaningful and which are not. Do away with those which are not good and highlight those which are. Maybe you want to establish some new ones.

Let children decorate the tree. Don't use fragile ornaments. Do use ones they have made and ones they have been given.

Spend time each night reading a few Christmas cards. Take turns reading. Talk about the senders. Pray for them. You don't have to read all the cards before Christmas. Take your time and enjoy them.

Use uncomplicated baking recipes when the children are around so they can help.

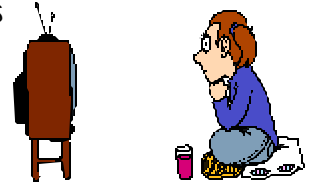
Reconsider perpetuating the Santa myth. There's some bad theology lodged in it. "Good" children are rewarded: "bad" not . . . unless you can fool old Santa. Where's grace?

4. **Realistic expectations about gifts:**

C Discuss the question of “Whose birthday is it, anyway?” with your children. Read Matthew 25:35-40 with them and together think about giving Jesus birthday presents. Decide on some ways as a family and be sure to follow through.

Children need to know that there are limits and why. If children are older, discuss with, but don't preach to, them the reasons for not giving into the pressure to buy, buy, buy.

C They also need help in understanding how advertising manipulates them. Young children need to have TV commercials pointed out to them. Older children need to discuss what is being said in commercials. Is it true or not? What “tricks” are used to make them want to buy? Help them laugh at the silliness of commercials.



C If your child is young, changing your gift-giving practices will be easy. If he/she is older, changes need to be made more slowly and with their input. Remember also, living speaks more clearly than talking. For example, an important factor in limiting children's TV watching is to curtail your own.

C Peer pressure will tend to make children feel deprived if they don't get everything advertisement has shoved on them. YOU need to realize that you are helping, not depriving, your children by resisting. Having special family traditions and giving special ways can offset the negative efforts you all may feel from not conforming.



C Mix in plenty of humor and recreation. For instance, many children enjoy looking for a gift in a treasure hunt (wrap in a box one clue that sends the child to another clue, and so on until the gift is found). Or a little rhyme or picture on the outside of the package as a hint to its contents is fun. So is wrapping one present inside of several wrapped boxes, each box being addressed to a different family member. The box is passed, unwrapped, and passed again until the final box.

C Don't let the appearance of a gift made by a child be more important than the act of creating it. And absolutely don't take the child shopping to buy a gift after he has made one for someone. This can say to him that his gift isn't good enough and/or that one has to spend money in order to gift another.

C Involve them in the joy of “giving to those He came to serve.” Bake for a party for local prisoners. Make a card for a shut-in. Give a toy to a local program serving needy children.

C Promises of a future gift put on coupons are excellent gifts for children, but care should be taken that each promise is realistic and that the child carries through. Don't push an idea on a child.

Gifts for Children On Toys

Play is very important for children. It is critical for the development of imagination, creative thought, problem solving and other related skills. Play also contributes to the development of positive attitudes about self and others. In addition, concerned adults can see to it that play builds positive attitudes toward those who are different racially and culturally. In spite of some theories of infant behavior and early childhood development (particularly those of the past 30 years), very few toys are required for children's optimal development.

C Poorly made toys become a battleground for adults and children, especially when money is scarce or a toy is expensive. Such toys are easily broken when played with in normal fashion. It is not fair to punish children for the sins of the manufacturer and of a careless shopper.

C Children may use "non-violent" toys in a violent way. Develop constructive ways of making clear to them that violence and aggression are self-destructive and harmful to others. If the child is often violent, check his or her television habits. There is a relationship.

C Manufactured toys have come to be preferred by many adults and children. There is a quiet movement growing in the country that is working to legitimize, once again, toys and gifts made by hand. Begin to make or buy handmade playthings for children. Do not join children in disparaging handmade or homemade toys.

C Careful choice of toys can help children develop responsibility, accountability, cooperation. Look for such toys; they are beginning to be produced, usually by small manufacturers, cooperatives, and/or peace organizations.

C Do not use toys to bribe children. Do not permit children to extort toys or shake you down for what they want. Do not feel badly or guilty if you do not buy and give them toys they expect. Television has made some children demanding consumers. (Overheard, one little boy whining, "Mommy, buy me this. It's only \$29.95.")

C "Toys Are Us" says Letty Cottin Pogrebin in *Growing Up Free*, which contains a useful chapter on toys. More precisely, they are expressions of the values of any society. Very often the toys and/or their packaging convey racist, sexist, classist, and often urbanist values; remove such packages before giving the child the toy. Be sure that your child's toys emphasize constructive values.

C Plan to spend time assessing children in the use, care and maintenance of toys. Be sure there's adequate space (no raggedy box, please) for storage. Be sensitive to the kind of lead time children need in order to complete play and put toys away, as carefully as clothing and books are put away. The process of completing play and putting toys away is one in which children learn important skills and processes.

C Before shopping, make a list of the children for whom you plan to buy gifts. Think about their toy collections. (Remember that a collection should inform, instruct, inspire and provide what used to be called "wholesome fun." Toys from different cultures of color that result in life-affirming, imaginative play should be included.) What toy would enhance the child's life and extend his/her play? Try to decide what you want to buy before you go shopping. Take your list with you. Then, good luck!

-reprinted from an insightful article: "Toys are Political, Too: A Guide to Gift-Giving the Year 'Round," by Geraldine L. Wilson.

A Few Hints

- C The best toys are ones that foster open-ended play and have multiple uses. The complicated toy with a single use will not retain a child's interest very long and may leave both the adult and child feeling bad about the choice. Toys that do it all for the child contribute little to growth. The sad jokes about the parent who buys a large, expensive toy for a child and finds out that the child would rather play with the box are all too often true. Examples of toys which stimulate creativity: blocks, puppets, "how-to" books, start-up collections, multiple use costumes, kits (see below).
- C It is better to give a child the "fixins" for something great, than the completed object:
 - C Artist's kit: tempura, brushes, paper (recycled is fine), apron (line old shirt with plastic)
 - C Tool kit: real hammer, nails, screwdriver, screws, ruler, pencil, saw, and something to keep it all in, wood scraps, white water-soluble glue, needles, thread, yarn, bits of lace, bias tape, etc.
- C Don't just give the kits, give him/her a space to work as part of the gift - a place which doesn't need to be cleaned all the time.
- C The gift of time is the most precious of all. Give a book and the written promise of a certain number of times a week during which you will read it. Give coupons promising special times with the child. HONOR THESE CAREFULLY.

