

The Holiday Season: Questions about Gifts and Giving

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I have been asked numerous questions about giving gifts to children during the holiday season. I would anticipate that the following are not unfamiliar to many of you:

“My kids request really expensive gifts. They tell me that all their friends are getting these kinds of gifts. What if we can’t afford to give them such expensive presents?”

“I feel guilty if I can’t give them things they would like, including the latest video game or a \$150 pair of sneakers. Is there something wrong with me for feeling guilty?”

“I told my children that there are children all over the world who would be happy to have a decent meal during the holiday season and that they should be grateful for what they have and they should stop asking for more. This comment didn’t go over very well.”

“My kids only want us to give them video and computer games. They already have dozens of them and they play them for hours. Last year when my husband and I didn’t buy them video games, they were disappointed and told us so. Actually, a more accurate description than *disappointed* is *angry* when they saw the books and non-video games we gave them. Why can’t kids be more grateful?”

“How does one keep the commercialism out of the holidays? My kids seem less interested in lighting the Chanukah candles and understanding the meaning of the holiday than immediately unwrapping their presents.”

“Our 12-year-old son wanted a Play Station for Christmas. We had intended to get it for him, but we told him we would only do so if he stopped whining, remembered to do his chores, and completed all of his homework. He has been a handful to manage. Well, his behavior didn’t improve and we didn’t get him the Play Station he wanted. We bought him some clothes instead. He looked devastated when he opened his presents. We told him that he had not earned the gift he wanted, but that if his behavior improved he might get it next Christmas. He accused us of not loving him. We told him we loved him, but he had to learn to become more responsible if he was to get what he wanted. Within a few minutes what should have been a happy occasion turned into a shouting match. Afterwards my husband and I spoke and wondered if whether giving certain presents at Christmas or other holidays to your children should be based on their behavior. Shouldn’t they earn the gifts?”

I am well aware that these and similar questions are not new. As a matter of fact, I recently came across an interview I did for UPI in December, 1977 (30 years ago, wow!) that was published in newspapers around the United States. The reporter asked me to offer some sage advice about several themes, one of which pertained to gift giving during the holiday season. Not surprisingly, as I read my quotes in this 1977 interview, I would have made some changes in what I said. Of course, the changes would be based upon 30 additional years of experience as a psychologist and a father (and five years as a grandfather). However, I was pleased to discover that I still subscribed to the essential points I offered in the interview. I also recognize that my answers to the reporter's queries were probably much more comprehensive than appeared in a condensed newspaper article.

Given the ongoing questions circling around the theme of holiday gifts I decided to share and up-date the views I expressed to the UPI reporter in 1977. The following represent some of my thoughts:

1. Presents given during the holiday season should not be used as rewards or punishments for a child's behavior. As many of you know from recent books I have co-authored with my colleague Sam Goldstein, including *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child*, I believe that one of our main roles as parents is to be a disciplinarian. However, similar to the view I expressed in my May, 2007 website article about providing children with an allowance, I believe that giving holiday gifts should not serve as a reward or punishment for particular behaviors. I am not suggesting we refrain from disciplining our children. Rather, other disciplinary techniques that do not involve holiday gifts should be used to teach children right from wrong and to modify negative behaviors. In my experience tying the giving of holiday presents (or an allowance) to a child's behavior can easily create tension and resentment to what should be a more joyous time. When resentment and anger dominate the scene, it is less likely that children will change their behavior.

2. Parents and other adults should examine their own motivations in selecting what they offer children. For instance, I have consulted with some parents who spend far more than their budget will allow in hopes of winning their child's love. I saw a couple in parent counseling who spent what was for them an inordinate amount of money during the holidays on their two

children. Both of them worked in jobs that required long hours and they felt guilty about not being as available to their children as they would have desired. They acknowledged that they hoped that lavish giving would convince their children that they loved them. Children often sense when we are attempting to buy their love and some will even use a parent's guilt to garner additional gifts. Presents should not be given to compensate for perceived gaps in our parenting practices. If such gaps exist they require thoughtful remedies throughout the year and not quick fixes during the holiday season that tend to be short-lived and ineffective.

3. The commercialism of the holiday season is here to stay. The reality is that starting with the day after Thanksgiving, a significant percentage of the sales that a business does for the year will take place during the subsequent five weeks. There is no way of shielding children from the deluge of advertisements that appear on television or in newspapers or magazines. Even if it were possible to shield children from seductive advertisements, children talk among themselves, often telling friends about the newest toy or gadget they hope to receive.

How best to counteract the holidays being associated primarily with receiving gifts? I believe one powerful antidote to commercialism is for families to engage in charitable activities. As Sam Goldstein and I have conveyed in our writings about resilience, an activity that contributes to a feeling of well-being, to a sense of purpose and compassion, and to resilience is when we provide assistance to others or to our community. We believe that there is an inborn need for children to help others. As parents, we must find ways to nurture and satisfy this need in our sons and daughters. The more we can become charitable families and involve our children in activities in which they are enhancing the lives of others, the more they will come to appreciate that the holiday season is not just about receiving, but, more importantly, about giving to others. There are many avenues through which a family can display its compassion and charity, such as collecting food or clothing for those less fortunate, or delivering meals for the elderly, or going to a store and purchasing and donating a toy to a charity to distribute to needy children.

In my workshops I have noted that the main vocabulary for many children involve the words, "Give me, give me, give me." Lecturing to them about how self-centered they are is likely to have little positive effect. Instead, we must provide them with opportunities to enrich

the lives of others. I realize that even if children engage in what we call “contributory activities,” they will still want things for themselves, but at least they will experience the joy of assisting others.

4. I have been asked on occasion how best to tell children that they will not be able to receive everything they want even if their desires are not extravagant. This question is often posed by parents who are struggling financially and are restricted in what they can spend. One mother sadly told me, “There’s the song about Santa Claus knowing whether you’ve been good or bad. I don’t want my kids to think they’ve done something wrong because we don’t have much money to buy them some of the things they would like to have.”

I responded to this mother’s comment by noting that even young children can be told with honesty that at least for this year, there won’t be as many gifts as they would like. I added that parents should still search for ways to reinforce the special quality of the holidays. I emphasized that while children may be disappointed in the gifts they receive, what’s essential is that the insecurities that often accompany financial difficulties be countered by a celebration that reinforces a family’s love and solidarity.

When I offered a similar response at one of my parenting workshops, a father asked, “What if your kids still believe in Santa Claus, how do you explain that he won’t bring all they want?” I stated that it was important for children not to think that they had done something wrong, but rather to explain to them that this year they received the gifts that Santa Claus had. I said to the father that children might still be upset, but highlighted that a guiding principle was to make certain that children felt loved. I added that to incur further debt to buy more toys for one’s children could easily exacerbate the situation. The added burden of having to pay larger bills would serve only to intensify the existing financial stress. I noted that children sense when parents are stressed, a situation that would greatly lessen any joy they felt upon receiving more gifts. A feeling of comfort and security is more significant to a child’s emotional well-being than a toy or game.

5. In the 1977 UPI article I advised that parents should shop carefully for presents that match their children’s interests and cognitive level. That suggestion may seem obvious, but I would now add a caveat, namely, to buy some items that require interaction between the child

and another child or adult. A common complaint I hear from parents is that their children play video or computer games by themselves for hours. While some of these games can enhance certain cognitive skills, if they are played in isolation the child is robbed of experiences of interacting with others.

On a related issue, it is unfortunate that children growing up in such a fast-paced world often show little interest in games that require a more deliberate, slower pace. I recently saw a news story on television that reported the manufacturers of such games as Monopoly have developed shortened versions of longer games so that there is a winner within a half-hour. The reasoning that prompted these changes was that today's youth, brought up on high stimulation video games, do not have the patience to play games that might take hours (or even days) to complete. I am not opposed to high stimulation video games played by oneself, but only in moderation. I would suggest we also have available games that require imaginative play among parents and children and among children themselves (please see my November, 2006 website article about the importance of play).

6. The final point I wish to make is familiar to all of us but is not always easy to fulfill. The most important gift we can give our children is that of time and unconditional love. When I interviewed adults and asked them what was one of their favorite childhood memories that involved their mother or father, a very frequent response involved a time they spent alone with a parent, a time when they had their mother or father's undivided attention and felt their parent's love and acceptance. Such memories will be cherished forever, far after holiday presents are used and discarded.

My best wishes to you and your family for a happy and relaxing holiday season.